

GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATES IN POLARIZING TIMES: EXAMINING  
GUBERNATORIAL DISCOURSE THROUGH POLITICAL INTERVIEWS

by

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## **Abstract**

The rise of partisan political news over the past two decades has influenced how political candidates discursively construct their image. While there is an extensive literature devoted to presidential discourse, little is known about what gubernatorial discourse looks like and how they construct their image. This study examines how gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their image in a hyperpolarized electoral environment. An extensive content analysis of gubernatorial political interviews (n = 94), and specifically the utterances arising from those interviews (n = 1,524), was conducted. Findings show that gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their own image as a savior to the state, while creating their opponent's and the DC elite's image as a villain. Additionally, gubernatorial candidates do not adhere to the image bound by their party, and construct an image that is unique to their environment. Consequently, the environment that a gubernatorial candidate is situated in influences how they communicate and construct their image and their opponent's image. By examining gubernatorial discourse through political interviews, this study offers theoretical implications into understanding the influence of polarization, issue ownership, and tone in gubernatorial discourse. Practical implications examine the role of media outlets in gubernatorial discourse. This study contributes to scholarly understanding of gubernatorial discourse in a changing and polarizing political environment.

Key terms: Gubernatorial discourse, Political interview, Election, Polarization, Issue ownership

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

In early 2015, the Republican Party got their first look at primary candidates for the 2016 presidential election. As potential candidates flocked to the Conservative Action Political Conference, which is largely considered the first step toward running for the Republican ticket, the news media reported a distinguishing trend among the potential candidates: a majority either currently hold or have recently held the office of governor. Sitting governors Scott Walker, Chris Christie and Bobby Jindal all touted their executive experience as qualification for the White House, while former governors Jeb Bush, Rick Perry, and Mike Huckabee touted their executive office experience and private sector experience since leaving office (Gonyea, 2015).

A governor running for the presidency is not a new trend. However, only recently has the news media begun to grab ahold and cover this influx of gubernatorial candidates running for the nation's highest office. As media outlets are more frequently engaging governors in their programming, they are by default engaging more current and potential gubernatorial candidates (Bradner, 2015). Dunn (2009) explains that as the national media begins to increase this engagement, gubernatorial candidates are caught in a discursive decision with their agenda. They can either choose to speak to their state's electorate and construct an image specific to them or they can choose to introduce themselves to a wider, national audience while creating an image for themselves as a respected voice within the national party.

Such a discursive decision is unique compared to other political candidates. For instance, presidential candidates are expected to speak to a national audience about only national issues. Whereas with gubernatorial candidates, they are caught in the middle of choosing to talk about state issues specific to their electorate or talk about national issues that could help construct their image as a viable future candidate for higher office. Consequently, the emergence of

gubernatorial candidates in the news media is turning gubernatorial discourse into a complex decision-making process about how to define a candidate's image (Rhea & Chattopadhyay, 2014).

Apart from their unique discursive decision, gubernatorial discourse is unique in that the office candidates are vying for has a vast amount of power compared to other political offices. Distinct from past scholarly inquiries arising from congressional, senatorial, and presidential candidates, governors and their respective state legislatures share the same party affiliation more than fifty percent of the time a governor is in office (Beyle, 1995; Winston, 2000). Consequently, in many states, the policy agenda of the governor is the policy agenda of the legislature. In discussing the vast legislative and partisan agenda pushing power that comes with being governor, former executive director of the of the National Association of State Budget Offices, Brian Roherty, said, "That's what people don't understand. That's [Governor's Office] where the power is" (Thurman, 1997, p. 1). As Starr (2013) explains, while the president and congress can enact wide-sweeping policy reform that affects all fifty states, it is often the governors who are making the calls about how to implement that policy.

Despite governors holding the power they do, and the unique discursive decision they have to make, little attention has been paid to governors and gubernatorial campaign discourse (Cooper & Knotts, 2004). Much of the preceding literature involving political discourse has largely focused on presidential, congressional and senatorial campaigns (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Lim, 2006; Petrocik, 1996). Consequently, understanding how gubernatorial candidates construct their image when making this discursive decision is currently unknown. Hart (2000) explains such is the case because gubernatorial discourse lacks the "thrust-and-parry" as seen in DC politics (p. 94). Despite this lack of scholarly research, one thing continues

to manifest itself in our political structure: gubernatorial candidates are becoming increasingly important in our national political discourse (Wells et al., 2014).

Consequently, how gubernatorial candidates construct their image is becoming an important focal point in their ability to win election. In the past, gubernatorial candidates were known for constructing an image that accentuated the positive in one's character (Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010). However, rhetorical scholars such as Sheffield (2010) and Wideman (2011) suggest that such image construction of gubernatorial candidates is changing due to the increasing polarization in political discourse.

While such studies suggest a unique rhetorical situation, an empirical inquiry is necessary to examine how gubernatorial candidates talk and define themselves. This study seeks to provide descriptive answers to how gubernatorial candidates construct their image, how they choose to talk about themselves and their opponents, and what types of issues gubernatorial candidates choose to talk about as they compete for their state's executive office in an increasingly polarizing political environment. Due to this unique discursive decision that Dunn (2009) illustrates, understanding how issues function in gubernatorial image construction is of importance.

Within recent years, candidates' images are more frequently being defined by their perceived credibility on how they handle specific issues (Arbour, 2014). Whereas prior inquiries have examined how trait ownership functions in constructing a candidate's image (Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006; Hayes, 2005, 2011), this study applies issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996). Issue ownership assumes that a political party and their candidates are able to handle specific issues more appropriately compared to other political parties. Consequently, issue ownership theorizes that candidates will focus on issues that their political party handles



the best—or owns. Inquiry into how candidates use these issues to construct their image is thus of importance. Aden (1988) goes so far as to contend that there is a relationship between how an electorate perceives a candidate's position on the issues and how credible they are as a person. Such an occurrence inherently suggests that issues are invaluable toward image construction, despite a lack of scholarly inquiry into understanding it through a gubernatorial context.

This research seeks to examine gubernatorial candidates' image construction through interview discourse. Political interviews are unique in that the discourse between the journalist and politician only adheres to assumed guidelines, but without the rigid structure of a debate, town hall, or stump speech. The discourse organically grows from an initial question to follow-up questions and comments based on the assumingly unscripted answer to a journalist's original question. Due to this relatively unstructured nature, Ball (1994) appropriately argues, "interviews with political actors highlight the struggle both to control the event and to control meanings" (p. 96). In this struggle to control and define the meaning of a political situation, the interview offers authentic and unscripted discourse to arise that showcases a candidate's true image (Eriksson, 2010).

Additionally, Jamieson (1992) suggests that political interviews "are far more successful at making public officials answer important questions than news conferences or debates, because neither the length of reporter questions and follow ups nor politician answers is artificially constrained" (p. 226). Without the artificial constraints, gubernatorial candidates discursively engage with a counter agent, the journalist, who offers context for argumentation and rebuttals to flourish. This project hopes to showcase how gubernatorial candidates communicate with journalists, constituents and their opponents in this unique discursive format.

Identifying the communicative behaviors of gubernatorial candidates and journalists during political interviews offers a glimpse into how both parties attempt to appeal to their respective audience (e.g., their constituents and their viewers). Such research is valuable on three fronts. First, it offers insight into how gubernatorial candidates construct their image in a hyperpolarized environment. Insight into such discourse should offer understanding as to how gubernatorial candidates choose when or how to talk about federal issues in constructing their state image. Further, such inquiry offers further explanation of how gubernatorial candidates act as a representative voice of the state and showcases the assumed state's position on specific federal issues. Research into this potential discursive shift provides context into understanding how gubernatorial candidates talk about themselves, their opponent and the DC elite.

Second, this project sheds light on how gubernatorial candidates manage their image through a media platform that does not contain a pre-written script to speak from. While political interviews offer the opportunity for politicians to manage their images, journalists also have the opportunity to ensure it is not just a façade. Meyer, Marchionni, and Thorson (2010) explain that, even with the increasingly partisan identity of political news outlets, integrity and credibility are still considered important attributes for successfully reporting the news. Such an interpersonal discourse, where one makes a move and the other actor can ensure that move is genuine, does not always happen in advertisements (Shen, 2004) or even candidate debates (Holbrook, 1999). Understanding how this politically motivated discourse functions in a format that necessitates qualities of integrity and credibility by both the journalist and politician could be insightful for both gubernatorial discourse and understanding the role of the journalist in political discourse.

Finally, this research offers a descriptive analysis of what gubernatorial discourse looks like. While previous literature offers insight into how discursive tone and issue ownership

operates in scripted advertisements (Benoit, Airne, & Brazeal, 2011; Benoit et al., 2010; Benoit, Ferguson, Seifert, & Sargardia, 2013), less is known about how gubernatorial candidates might manage such variables in a fluid conversation between two people. Additionally, this project offers an understanding of how gubernatorial candidates operate in the noted increased polarized media landscape.

The following chapter will review the existing literature on gubernatorial discourse and the role of political interviews. First, I will discuss the gubernatorial candidates' growing autonomous power in the political sphere and their discourse. Second, I will explicate image construction in gubernatorial politics and the discursive mechanism for image construction. Third, I will review the backdrop of the political interview and the current environment for journalism. Then, I will illustrate the use of content analysis as the methodology for this study. Finally, I will provide the findings of this study and offer theoretical and practical implications.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

To better understand the characteristics of gubernatorial discourse, this chapter reviews literature explicating 1) gubernatorial candidates and their electoral discourse, 2) the image construction in gubernatorial discourse, and 3) political interviews and interview discourse.

### **Gubernatorial Candidates and Their Discourse**

This section examines the growing recognition of gubernatorial candidates and gubernatorial elections in the age of polarized politics. Such insight provides the basis for understanding what gubernatorial discourse looks like and how their discourse fits into the broader scene of political discourse.

#### ***Gubernatorial Candidates***

Over the past two decades, political news media have begun to recognize the growing influence of gubernatorial races in the American political landscape. Whereas presidential campaigns garner much attention and a modest voter turnout, gubernatorial elections do not have as high a voter turnout as during a presidential year (Atler, 2014). For instance, the midterm elections in 2014 hit a seventy-two year low when only 36.4% of eligible voters participated, compared to the 2012 general election when 58.2% of voters turned out (Atler, 2014).

Despite such low turnout, anywhere from thirty-five to forty gubernatorial races are decided in midterm election years (Jackson, 2002). Consequently, midterm elections commonly determine the fate of nearly fourth-fifths of our nation's highest state offices. In the past, gubernatorial elections have required the creation of a resistant collective movement to inspire hope and action that mobilizes voters to get out to the polls (Cox & Munger, 1989). For example, resistance to health care reform in 2010 became a rallying cry to aid in creating a collective

movement through the Tea Party, resulting in a higher midterm turnout than average at 40.9% (Atler, 2014).

Such movements are part of the new trend news media focuses on in their coverage of gubernatorial elections and candidates (Abramowitz, 2011). Media outlets view such movements, like the Tea Party, as catalysts for spurring polarized discourse and constructing a scene that showcases an “us versus them” mentality (Wells et al., 2014). It is this type of movement on the ground level that gubernatorial candidates are often required to talk about. Wells et al. (2014) explain that gubernatorial candidates are in an odd position. Even more so than presidential candidates, gubernatorial candidates are almost required to take a position of support or non-support on these divisive political activities because they have to interact and answer to the ground troops of these movements on a daily basis (Wells et al., 2014).

Due to this proximity to voters, gubernatorial candidates also commonly use their run for governor as a testing ground to establish name recognition and showcase their executive leadership for future presidential runs (Beyle, 2011). As governors turned presidents have materialized often over the past forty years, Winston (2000) contends that presidential candidates who were once governors are considered as more relatable and pragmatic compared to congressional or senatorial office holders vying for the oval office. Quite simply, they are viewed as being the candidates more capable of talking face-to-face with voters on a daily basis because it is a necessary quality to win a gubernatorial election.

### ***The Shift of Gubernatorial Discourse***

Gubernatorial candidates are becoming an increasingly important focal point of midterm electoral cycles. As a result, some scholars argue that gubernatorial discourse has been following the general trend of polarizing discourse. Until recently, it has been common for gubernatorial

discourse to take a more positive and encouraging tone compared to presidential campaign discourse (Benoit et al., 2010). For instance, Benoit and Arne (2009) found that over the past decade, gubernatorial discourse has been uncommonly positive in political advertisements. Advertisements commonly emphasize the candidate they are supporting instead of denouncing one's opponent. However, Benoit, Furgerson, Seifert and Vogt's (2013) content analysis of media coverage of senate, gubernatorial and mayoral elections in 2010 and 2011 found an increase in attacking one's opponent compared to years past in gubernatorial discourse. Such a finding suggests that gubernatorial discourse could be changing from what it once was. Additionally, the media are beginning to spend more time focusing on the negative qualities of a candidate compared to a candidate's positive and experiential features (Benoit et al., 2010). The most common source for focusing on negative candidate's attributes is their opponents who are given airtime during a political interview. Lake (1989) contends that these negative attributes are an attempt to showcase how one candidate is better equipped to handle certain issue concerns compared to the other candidate.

In addition, the emergence of the Tea Party in 2008 has altered the landscape of gubernatorial discourse between incumbents and challengers (Wideman, 2011). Based on a rhetorical analysis of gubernatorial town hall meetings, Wideman (2011) illustrates that the Tea Party constructed an entirely new rhetorical space for how gubernatorial candidates could talk with and to one another. More specifically, with the emergence of the Tea Party, Wideman (2011) argues that discourse quickly became heated and divisive, creating a mindset of "you're either with us or you're against us." For instance, following his third term re-election efforts in 2010, Texas Governor Rick Perry exclaimed,

All across the country in precinct after precinct, the wave of dissatisfaction has been building for nearly two years and it crested tonight in the form of conservatives winning offices and champions of big government are cleaning out their desk right now. (Shannon & Heinz, 2010)

Jamieson and Waldman (2003) provide some context to this possible shift. They suggest that when elections are not for federal office, candidates are more competent at playing the game of politics than they are in talking about policy. Benoit et al. (2013) similarly found that gubernatorial campaigns in the media merely become a horse race of character qualities rather than policy positions. Instead of accentuating the positivity of one's own character, in recent years gubernatorial candidates have been negatively attacking their opponent's image (Ross & Comrie, 2012). While it was more common for republicans to engage in a discussion about one's image in the past, democrats are similarly engaging in a discussion of character and image (Benoit & Rill, 2013).

Further, Jackson (2002) contends that gubernatorial campaigns in midterm election years commonly redress and frame political or influential events for discussion in the next presidential election. For instance, how gubernatorial candidates talked about the Republican Revolution movement in 1994 greatly influenced how Bob Dole framed his platform in the 1996 presidential election. In the 1994 midterms following President Clinton's election two years prior, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, led the "revolution" where republican candidates swept through states' gubernatorial offices under Gingrich's proposed "Contract with America" (Rothenberg, 2006). The Contract for America invoked conservative social and fiscal principles that eventually became the backbone for Republican Senator Bob Dole's ascension to the 1996 republican presidential nomination. More recently, the Tea Party Express functioned as

such a stimulus in the 2010 elections that saw an influx of republican gubernatorial wins. Naturally, in 2012, republican nominee Mitt Romney was told he would fail to win unless he evoked a discursive strategy that the Tea Party and his base sought of limited government and social conservative values (Wu & Coleman, 2014).

It is not uncommon for political messaging tactics to be tested by parties in the gubernatorial midterm election years and then, if effective with voters, carried over to that party's presidential candidate's discourse in two years (Benjamin, 2006). Such a laboratory for experiment should come as no surprise. Even though the majority of scholarship in this area has focused on senatorial campaigns during midterm elections, senators represent only one out of a hundred players. The governor's office represents an executive office similar to that of the president, except it is often considered more autonomous with more rank and file statehouse members (Tompkins, 1988).

### **Image Construction in Gubernatorial Discourse**

Just as gubernatorial discourse may have shifted in recent years, so too has the way gubernatorial candidates construct their image (Benoit et al., 2010; Karande, Case, & Mady, 2008). To understand how gubernatorial candidates create their image and their opponent's, it is necessary to examine how candidates construct their character and issue positions.

#### ***Establishing a Villain and a Savior***

In establishing one's own image and attempting to influence their opponent's, political candidates undergo a unique discursive process (Funk, 2004). Funk (2004) describes it as a process of making discursive decisions about adhering to the norms of courtesy, reciprocity between different audiences, politeness and self-restraint in constructing an appropriate political image. Additionally, Ben-Porath (2010) describes it as a decision-making process that is often



influenced by the attitudes of the electorate and the candidates involved. For instance, the Democratic Governors Association (DGA) recognized the electorate's growing dissatisfaction with DC politicians in 2013. Consequently, in his 2013 bid for Virginia Governor, former republican Virginia attorney general Ken Cuccinelli's image "took a hit" when the DGA released an advertisement claiming that Cucinnelli couldn't be trusted and that he would be just another weapon in Speaker John Boehner's pockets. In doing so, not only did democrats tie this republican gubernatorial candidate to a disgraced character of being untrustworthy, but also implicated that he is no different than the political villain seen in D.C.

The establishment of such a villain as Cuccinelli is not uncommon. Lodge and McGraw (1995) demonstrate that the lack of trust and relatability are the most common traits that many candidates use to portray their opponents. Often, candidates question their opponents' moral compass (Dunn & Sinclair, 2008) and tie them to the risky Washington elite, who ultimately are considered untrustworthy to voters. When this narrative occurs, the audience becomes immersed in a story that describes federal politicians as uncommon and ill equipped to handle state concerns and the opposing candidate as an inauthentic statesman (Ben-Porath, 2010). Billing the federal candidate as a scripted talking head, and the statesman candidate as genuine creates a clear contrast of what is authentic and what is not (Louden & McCauliff, 2005). Such negative billing by the candidate has been found to be an effective mechanism for increasing interest in the campaign (Lovejoy, Riffe & Cheng, 2014).

Martin (2011) suggests that in vilifying their opponent, the candidate simultaneously showcases how he or she makes up for their apparent shortcomings. This results in what Hellweg (1995) defines as a unitary view of voter perception for candidates: it is a binary choice of us or them. Oftentimes, candidates will define their own character as that of a religious, family and

community-minded person when making any policy decisions (Atkinson & Leon Berg, 2012). These candidates identify themselves as saviors to what's lacking in their opponent, and show how they are similar in upholding the moral values to which their constituents attempt to adhere. As such, the discourse has a binary functionality – you either have this moral compass or you do not (Atkinson & Leon Berg, 2012).

Simultaneously, previous research indicates that, in proclaiming themselves as the savior and hero to political environment, political candidates also identify themselves and constituents as present or potential victims to the immoral opposing candidate (Atkinson & Leon Berg, 2012). In their attempt to retrieve themselves from victimhood, they employ an aggressive discourse that offers a zero-sum game between them and damnation. However, Weinberg (2010) is quick to note that even these saviors, who decry their opponents as villains due to similarities with federal politicians, discursively attempt to construct an image that portrays the same character and leadership qualities one expects from a presidential candidate (Wu & Coleman, 2014). For instance, in Colorado's 2014 gubernatorial election, republican candidate Bob Beauprez ran a thirty-second advertisement that showcased how democratic incumbent Governor John Hickenlooper was a friend with President Obama and failed to advance immigration reform because of Obama's inappropriate priorities. However, if elected, Beauprez would find a solution to immigration reform to fight back against the Obama regime and their misguidance of American values (Stokols, 2014). In doing so, Beauprez establishes constituents as victims of a moral crisis unless he, the savior, is elected.

### ***Constructing a Relatable Image***

In creating a genuine statesman image, gubernatorial candidates are also working toward constructing an image that is relatable to the voters. Wells et al. (2014) noticed a common and

unsurprising theme arising from political discourse: voters care about issues that are specific to them. Consequently, candidates often choose to talk about issues that are relevant and specific to their audience (Rhea & Chattopadhyay, 2014). For instance, in front of college students, candidates might talk about education, whereas in front of senior citizens, candidates might discuss health care. Petrocik (1996) originally noticed this trend of talking about issues that are only specific to a certain audience as a candidate's ability to discuss performance issues. Performance issues are issues that a specific audience feels that either political party could claim expertise on—i.e., issues not owned by either party (Petrocik, 1996).

Discussion of performance issues signals that a candidate is in tune with the concerns of the public they serve (Petrocik, 1996). In fact, former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, came to the conclusion after a bitterly fought re-election effort, "all politics is local" (O'Neill & Hymel, 1995). As candidates construct an image of being the savior and their opponent as the villain, candidates are struggling amongst each other for being a trusted source of knowledge for voters (Lodge & McGraw, 1995). The more in tune with voters' concerns they are, the more likely voters are to trust them.

Constructing an image that is trustworthy provides the electorate with a perception of a candidate's "person node" (Lodge & McGraw, 1995). A person node is the memory that someone maintains of a public figure they encounter. This memory is created through a "dynamic building process" that creates a "cognitive representation of what we *know* and *believe* about another" (Hamilton, 1980, p. 239). However, Lodge and McGraw (1995) recognize that this perception is heavily influenced by how relatable a politician is to their constituents. For instance, should candidates fail to showcase how they face similar trials and tribulations of balancing a checkbook, putting food on the table, or providing their children with a quality

education, the perception from voters is likely that of a flawed and out of touch candidate. Consequently, Lodge and McGraw (1995) explain that it is common to see messages from candidates talk in detail about the aforementioned business or household tasks.

Recognizing that confidence in leadership is commonly a result of likeability and relatability, Gallup has found that every winning presidential candidate since 1960 has been the more relatable and down-to-earth candidate (McNulty, 2012). Naturally, candidates for any office have begun to recognize this growing necessity to express themselves as relatable to their potential constituents. For instance, when Nebraska republican gubernatorial candidate Pete Ricketts, Chief Operating Officer of Ameritrade Financial, was asked how he could possibly identify with the life of every day Nebraskans, he exclaimed:

You know, growing up I remember after dinner at night mom and dad going back down to the office and taking us kids with them because they had more work to do. My dad worked just about every weekend. We lived on a budget. My siblings and I cooked a lot of our own meals and washed the dishes and it was a very typical, middle class upbringing. (Head, 2014)

In such an instance, despite having a personal net worth of \$50 million dollars, a family majority stake in a major league baseball team, and a family net worth of \$1.5 billion (Omaha World Herald, 2014), Rickett's image portrayal is that of a middle-class family. He portrays himself as being raised in a family that values hard work, shared duties, and fiscal responsibility. Similar values that ordinary Nebraskans value every day in their families and their government officials.

### ***The Role of Issue Ownership***

As candidates attempt to construct this down-to-earth and relatable image of themselves, inherent environmental and political factors play a role in image construction. The seemingly

aggressive discourse that has emerged with the Tea Party has sprouted inquiry into whether a shift has occurred in how a candidate's character is defined. Aden (1988) contends that there is a relationship between how an electorate perceives a candidate's position on the issues and how credible they are as a person. Similarly, Arbour (2014) found that an audience's perception of a candidate's character is inherently related to whether they believe a candidate is most equipped to *handle* a certain political issue. Naturally, candidates associate their image credibility with issues that their party owns (Petrocik, 1996). Walgrave, Lefevre and Nuytemans (2009) concur with this assessment, explaining that how candidates communicatively frame their solutions to issue concerns can affect their perceived credibility. For instance, it is plausible to suggest that as gubernatorial candidates claim that their opponent is unable to relate to the concerns of the state because of their 'DC elite' mindset, the discursive question of whether or not a candidate is capable of handling certain issues specific to the state arises.

Petrocik's (1996) issue ownership theory contends that a candidate's ability to handle or solve an issue contributes to the maintenance of issue ownership over time. As statewide candidates contend they are the best candidate to solve federal issues as well as state issues, issue ownership becomes increasingly complex (Brown, 2010). For instance, how a candidate contends to handle their own state's economy could be inherently different from how they suggest handling the federal economy. Yet, because of their unique office and often lofty political ambitions to obtain a cabinet position or run for presidency, gubernatorial candidates are often asked their opinion by media on issues of both state and federal policy (Lovejoy, Riffe & Cheng, 2014). Thus attempting to provide a unified stance that does not contradict that state-federal continuum is likely to remain difficult at best. Additionally, considering that only 7% of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing (Gallup, 2014), it makes sense for candidates to

discursively attempt to place the ownership of federally divisive issues (immigration, spending, health care, etc.) as beholden to their opponent's issue credibility, and consequently, their character.

Further, in constructing a candidate's image, Petrocik (1996) points out that there is a tendency for presidential candidates to emphasize republican issues. This is because republicans own more national issues and, thus emphasizing such issues creates an image of understanding one's electorate. Brazeal and Benoit (2008) found that congressional candidates alternatively highlight democratic issues more frequently because of the specialized population. Generally speaking, each party's gubernatorial candidate creates an image that aligns their values and morality of character through a message that reflects whichever party they belong (Benoit, Airne & Brazeal, 2011). Character factors involving "incumbency status, personality, and constituent services" appear to have an effect on how an audience perceives a candidate's credibility on handling certain issues (Brazeal & Benoit, 2008, p. 20). However, issue ownership has generally only been applied to debate settings, advertisements, and town hall forums. How issue ownership operates in a setting where the journalist, in addition to the politician, is facilitating what issues to cover provides a new frame of inquiry.

Identifying ownership over a set of political issues in a gubernatorial election will not automatically win a candidate election. However, it does feed into how an electorate perceives that candidate's image. This is especially important when one considers the type of setting in which a candidate is located: solid red state, solid blue state, or a purple state. Sheffield (2010) suggests that the interplay between what issues candidates are expected to discuss and what type of politically competitive state or race they are in plays a role in determining their actual message.

Additionally, Sheffield (2010) and Prysby (2008) suggest that candidate's issue messages are likely to buck trends when the environment is ripe for competition regardless of whether the state is historically blue or red. For instance, despite being a solid red state, the 2014 gubernatorial contest in Kansas is considered a "toss up" race by a multitude of political polling outlets (Gallup, 2014; Rasmussen, 2014). As Prysby (2008) explains, in such a case, how an opposing party candidate approaches their discursive choices will be unique compared to years when it is known that the majority party will win. Candidates might be more engaged with performance issues compared to party-owned issues in such cases (Prysby, 2008).

### **Political Interviews**

The news media and journalist play an important role in constructing images for political candidates. Hofstettler, Zukin and Buss (1978) found that journalists often ask interview questions that reinforce existing preconceived perceptions of candidates. For instance, if a candidate is conservative, then journalists are more likely to ask how moral values play a role in their governing. Whereas with democrats, journalists are more likely to ask how their public education plays a role in their governing. Journalists attempt to confirm the electorate's preconceived perceptions of candidates by talking about issues the electorate expects to hear from that candidate (Ben-Porath, 2010). This section explicates on the role of political interviews, its changing landscape, and the discursive style of political interviews.

### ***Role of Political Interviews***

Craig (2008) defines the political interview as a showcase of attempted discourse between a journalist and politician who, in the process of constructing discourse, must balance differing or similar ideologies, values and beliefs about the world. Such a balancing act recognizes that the purpose of the interview is different for both actors involved. The end hope of

the interview is to allow both actors to achieve their goal of informing, persuading, or providing “face-time” with the electorate (Lauerbach, 2007, p. 1394).

As a noticeably valuable platform, the interview provides politicians the ability to maintain and potentially improve a self-presentation in front of a distant audience (Eriksson, 2010). Similarly, journalists have the ability to maintain their own partisan face while providing a perceived bi-partisan platform for their consumers (Baum & Groeling, 2010). For the audience, this new political interview acts as a showcase of argumentation between competing forces that aids in a seemingly perceived one-sided political topic (Hutchby, 2011).

Most uniquely, interviews function as a viable platform for maintaining a political candidate’s image and repairing past harms done to one’s image. Image repair is an invaluable asset in an age where one’s character is constantly attacked for being untrustworthy or unethical because of ties to D.C. politicians. Benoit’s (1997) theory of image restoration contends that an image must be repaired when (1) the accused is held responsible for an action and (2) that act is considered offensive.

Benoit (1997) points out that for both conditions, it is not the reality of whether or not both contentions are met, but the audience perception of whether both tenants are met. Naturally, if the President is blamed for a policy that voters disagree with, and then a candidate ties their opponents to the President because of a similar party affiliation, that candidate is held responsible for that same offensive action. In managing this discursive tension and attempting to repair one’s perceptively attained image, it is common for politicians to employ the interview platform as a means to re-shift the electorate’s perception or idea as to what their image of a candidate might be (Jones, 2010).



### *Changing Landscape of Political Interviews*

As the news media industry has shifted away from the public affairs interview, they have begun to embrace the soft news style (Hoffman, 2013; Patterson, 2000). Plasser (2005) defines soft news as infotainment, journalist-centered analysis that focuses on the personalization and privatization of politics. Given this shift, it is appropriate to think of news media not as hard and soft genres, but instead on two continua. Coe et al. (2008) describe the first continuum as one that gauges the style of presentation “running from more objective or neutral presentation of the news to more openly opinionated presentation” (p. 203). The second continuum gauges the primary emphasis of the news: entertainment or informing the public.

Most poignantly, entertainment is favored over substance when the news reports on political campaigns (Gulati et al., 2004). Consequently, professional journalism that we remember with the likes of Walter Cronkite and Edward Murrow has largely shifted to a media-inspired dialogue of partisanship and selective exposure. Rather than consuming the once popular non-partisan public affairs programs, electorates gravitate towards watching partisan media outlets that reinforce their political beliefs and ignore discrepant viewpoints (Lovejoy, Riffe, & Cheng, 2014). The key mechanism for soft news media programs to successfully promote entertainment instead of substance largely arises from their ability to frame a desired reality for the audience. Commonly, issues are framed through an ideological lens of what you perceive your audience to be in an effort to boost ratings.

This shift toward partisan, soft news has created a unique balance for the roles of a politician and journalist in the interview. The interview has become, aptly, political in nature (Baym, 2013). The past two decades have resulted in the reframing of these roles to consequently reflect the ideological paradigms set in place by the Republican and Democratic

parties (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). As a result, journalists now must serve two roles in the political interview: maintain integrity as an investigator, but also be a partisan performer (Hoffman, 2013). Similarly, politicians must not only be an expert on the legislative and political field, but a representative party-line voice for their base (Hoffman, 2013).

This gradual shift to a soft news style interview over hard news has unsurprisingly called journalistic integrity into question (Hutchby, 2011). However, Plasser (2005) responds to this concern by explaining that until the remaining few hard news outlets (e.g., CBS, ABC, and BBC) change their standards, soft news must still feign journalistic principles. Accordingly, Hoffman (2013) states that soft news have explored alternative routes to interviews that allows them to adhere to journalist integrity and a sense of objectivity, while putting on a partisan face. For instance, it is common that MSNBC or Fox News will have as an interview guest a politician from the opposing ideological party. Bringing in an opposing viewpoint provides viewers with the perception that the outlet is willing to be inclusive of all viewpoints, however, the journalist's tone and interaction with the politician suggests that the candidate is nothing more than a punching bag for attacks (Ben-Porath, 2010).

### ***Discursive Style of the Political Interview***

Considering this transition from the public affairs interview to a more politicized interview, it is pertinent to discuss the style of interview discourse. From a broad perspective, interviews have been regarded as discourse that reflects “interpersonal communication within [an] organizational framework” (Cohen, 1989, p. 435). Such an interpretation reflects an inherent discursive tension between the norms of interviewing with ratings in mind and the normative expectations of interpersonal communication (Ben-Porath, 2010). This discursive tension is prone to be exhibited through incivility by both interview participants (Forgette & Morris, 2006).

However, when quality discourse does occur, it offers a valuable mechanism for informing a partisan electorate (Ben-Porath, 2010).

Prior research into political interview discourse is extensive. Sowinska (2013) explains that language offers the foremost medium for elites to showcase an ideological discourse. The political interview showcases a question-and-answer style discourse that demands elicitation of information from the politician. In this shifting partisan paradigm, journalists often seek questions of privatization or individualization (Herder, 2013). While privatization discourse focuses on the politician as a private citizen through personality and character, individualization seeks the politician's expert testimony. While either type of discourse inquiry can become meaningful dialogue, Clayman (2001) suggests discourse quality is dependent on the politician's response.

Consequently, discursive tone highlights the tensional dynamic between the parties in discourse construction. Harris (1991) explains that discursive tone is important as it reveals when parties are challenging the other to elicit a rationale or justification for a policy position or policy action that was taken. However, the tensional dynamic that arises is really only helpful for the audience when it is done in a civil manner. Such civility is commonly seen in discursive tone when candidates engage in discussion through a tone of self-praising in their attempt to justify why they are a good candidate for the office (Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010).

Similar to any discursive style in the media, interview discourse continues to evolve. Discursive aggressiveness in interviews has increased over the years through the veil of watchdog journalism (Ben-Porath, 2010). Smith et al. (1997) suggest that watchdog journalism is how journalists justify their on-air conduct. Consequently, this aggressive style is becoming prevalent in soft news media. Despite news consumers' desire for journalists to advance a

“communal good”, rather than going after political leaders to provoke them into argument (Poindexter, Heider & McCombs, 2006), Smith et al. (1997) found that two-fifths of the public perceived journalists as too aggressive. However, often times, journalists make no excuse for their increasingly aggressive tactics. For instance, from one of the more seemingly partisan outlets, MSNBC journalist Chris Matthews justifies his hard-hitting process for political interviews:

I interview the people who run the country, hit them with hard questions and challenge them to give real answers. If it's too boisterous, too loud for you, let me leave you with a warning: Democracy is a noisy business (Matthews, 2001, p. 213).

Providing insight into how discursive tone operates with this new style of aggressive journalism fills a dearth of scholarship in understanding the journalist-politician dynamic at play. Inquiry into aggressive journalism focuses on the “interactional conduct” that “fruitful quantification requires a thorough grasp of how journalistic vigorousness or aggressiveness is instantiated at the ground level, in actual practices of questioning” (Clayman et al., 2006, p. 563).

As previously illustrated, little research has been devoted to understanding how this new tensional style of gubernatorial discourse operates in political interviews. This study aims to extend the existing literature by examining how gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their own image and attempt to construct their opponent's image during political interviews. Such inquiry merits scholarly attention because gubernatorial discourse highlights where “the real power is at” in politics (Thurman, 1997). Most importantly, such inquiry will provide insight into how gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their image in this hyperpolarized political environment.

## **Research Inquiries**

The preceding literature offers copious room that begs for descriptive inquiry into gubernatorial discourse. First, based on rhetorical analysis, Atkinson and Leon-Berg (2012) and Wideman (2011) posited that a rhetorical situation has recently emerged that allowed governors and gubernatorial candidates to begin showcasing a dialogical blend between federal and state issues. This trend differs from as recently as the early 2000s when candidates strictly adhered to talking about issues affecting their state (Karande, Case, & Mady, 2008). Wideman (2011) suggests that this discursive blend of federal and state issues is creating an “us versus them” mentality. To examine the federal and state discursive balance in gubernatorial discourse, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: How often do gubernatorial candidates discuss federal issues vs. state issues?

RQ2: How do gubernatorial candidates talk about federal issues vs. state issues?

Second, considering rhetorical inquiries that suggest an “us versus them” mentality in gubernatorial discourse, insight into how candidates are talking about themselves and their opponents is necessary. Ben-Porath (2010) contend that the polarization emerging in the current political discourse has constructed the need for candidates to construct their opponent as villains associated to the DC elite. Alternatively, candidates are likely to be constructing their own image as saviors to the state’s problems. Such claims require further inquiry through an empirical viewpoint. Based on the previous literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: In constructing their own image, gubernatorial candidates will more frequently discuss issues specific to their individual state compared to federal issues.

H2: In attempting to construct their opponent’s image, gubernatorial candidates will more frequently discuss federal issues compared to issues specific to their state.

Next, Petrocik (1996) suggests that candidates will adhere to issues that are owned by their party. Benoit, Airne, and Brazeal (2011) found confirming evidence that gubernatorial and senatorial candidates adhere to their party-owned issues in political debates. However, considering the local political divisiveness arising from voters through such movements as the Tea Party and record disapproval ratings of the DC elite, inquiry into issue ownership in gubernatorial discourse is warranted. Therefore, the following question is asked:

RQ3: How often do gubernatorial candidates discuss democratic vs. republican issues with a democratic president in office?

Finally, the context in which a gubernatorial contest occurs needs further examination. Previous research has examined how non-presidential candidates discursively maneuver their electoral environment (Benoit et al., 2010; Benoit, Airne, & Brazeal, 2011; Brazeal & Benoit, 2008; Walgrave, Lefevre, & Nuytemans, 2009), however little research has been done on how gubernatorial candidates maneuver their political environment. Brazeal and Benoit (2008) found that candidates running in non-presidential campaigns have the ability to maneuver their environment and speak on issues their electorate wants to hear as opposed to purely talking only on party-owned issues. In addition to party-owned issues, Abramowitz (2011) explains that the political makeup of the state—e.g., red, blue or purple state—is an influential factor in how gubernatorial candidates talk. Similarly, just as candidates are constrained by their party and their physical location, the platform of the interview is just as important. Sheffield (2010) explains that the platform of the interview—e.g., local or national audience—is likely to play a role in how political candidates engage with the media. As such, the following research question is asked:

RQ4: Are there any differences between Democratic candidates and Republican candidates, blue, red, and purple states, and various media outlets?

These hypotheses and research questions should provide insight into what gubernatorial discourse looks like in today's media environment. The following chapter explains the use of a content analysis in order to offer context and answers to this research project's hypotheses and questions.

## **Chapter 3 – Methods**

Political interviews have been examined through a various theoretical frameworks and methods. For instance, Clayman and Heritage (2002) investigated the interactional organization and reconstruction of interviews using the conversation analysis. Fairclough (2001) looked at the functional element of language construction and reception. Wilson (1990) examined political interviews through a lens of pragmatics and the dichotomy of what is said compared to what is meant. Noticeably, Bull (2008) has done extensive work from a social-psychology framework to examine noncommittal political discourse in political interviews. Despite the varying approaches to analyzing political interview, they all consider interviews as a dynamic process that produces a meaningful discursive event (Fetzer & Bull, 2008).

This study employs a quantitative content analysis of gubernatorial candidate political interviews during the 2014 mid-term elections. Content analysis continues to be an effective tool for dissecting discourse in political interviews (Gnisci, Van Dalen, & Di Conza, 2014). This methodology allows for a statistical analysis and reveals not only what the content means, but the frequency of the content. The following paragraphs describe procedures, data, and a coding scheme.

### **Data Collection**

Political interviews were collected using a keyword search on the social media website Twitter. Additionally, the researcher identified specific Twitter handles of each major party candidate running for election or re-election in the thirty-six midterm gubernatorial elections. A total of seventy Twitter handles were identified, as two challengers against incumbents in Nevada and Tennessee did not have active handles. Of the 70 candidates involved in the 2014 electoral cycle, 28 were incumbents and the remaining were challengers and non-incumbents.



Additionally, 80.5% of the candidates were male and the remaining 19.5% were female. From those seventy Twitter handles, algorithms identified any message, or tweet, that went out that included the key terms of: *Interview*, *Television*, *TV*, *Media*, *Talk(s)*, and *News*. The algorithm further employed a time frame on each individual state gubernatorial race to identify only interviews that happened during the general election and discarded interviews that happened during the time period of the primary election. Due to its advanced algorithms for reaching a wider audience than other modes of media output, Twitter has become a viable medium for data collection in scholarship to understand relationships, patterns, and communication behavior (Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Glass, Straus & Shogan, 2011).

Using the time frame of the 2014 mid-term general elections for gubernatorial candidates, all interview URL addresses were entered into a spreadsheet and all interviews were transcribed. A total of 94 interviews were collected using this collection process, with a total of 1,524 utterances. These interviews ranged in time from one minute and thirty seconds to thirteen minutes. Provided, there is no complete repository of gubernatorial political interviews from which this research could ensure a holistic, entire population. However, Benoit, Airne, and Brazeal (2011) note that in such cases, the convenience sample can be valid as a mechanism for ensuring a holistic picture of the population. Twitter, as established by the aforementioned scholars (Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Glass, Straus & Shogan, 2011), showcases the viability of such a sample.

### *Unit of Analysis*

There are two units of analysis for this project. Initially, the interview served as a unit of analysis to code some situational factors that are consistent throughout the environment (e.g., type of media outlet, state interview occurs in, etc.). Then, an utterance was used as a unit of

analysis to examine the content of interview discourse. An utterance is an individual moment of spoken discourse by one individual that begins when they start talking and ends when they stop talking. Utterances are analyzed because they showcase (1) imbalances in authority between the politician and the journalist and (2) the differing levels of knowledge expertise by the two actors (Scheffer, 2007). Utterances help identify characteristic moments of discourse as to how actors negotiate meaning by managing these imbalances.

### **Coding Scheme**

To offer context to the content of messages that arise during political interview discourse, transcripts were coded into distinct categories. First, using an interview as a unit of analysis, the following descriptive categories were coded: scene of the interview, media outlet, and competitiveness of race. Then, each utterance was coded for some descriptive information about the speaker (e.g., journalists/politicians, incumbent/challenger, party ID, and gender) and the following content variables: type of utterance, tone of utterance, topic of utterance, scope of issue, and agents involved.

#### ***Scene of the Interview***

To provide understanding to the political acumen and choice of messaging that a candidate might use, the scene of the interview was coded as follows:

- (1) **Blue State:** a state whose gubernatorial elections are commonly won by democrat candidates. (e.g., California)
- (2) **Red State:** a state whose gubernatorial elections are commonly won by republican candidates. (e.g., Texas)
- (3) **Purple State:** a state whose gubernatorial elections are evenly won by both democrat and republican candidates. (e.g., Pennsylvania)

### ***Media Outlet***

The next variable investigates what type of outlet the journalist is working for. The following options are provided of either (1) **National Outlet** or (2) **Local Affiliate**.

### ***Competitiveness of the Race***

This variable examines whether or not the race has the potential to be a competitive election. For instance, this could be influential in determining whether a challenger increases or decreases their aggressiveness and whether an incumbent “plays it safe” with their level of aggressiveness. The following categories were used for this variable.

(1) ***Solid Republican***: a gubernatorial race in which it was expected the republican candidate would win by a margin of more than five percentage points (e.g., Alabama).

(2) ***Solid Democrat***: a gubernatorial race in which it was expected the democratic candidate would win by a margin of more than five percentage points (e.g., California).

(3) ***Toss Up***: a gubernatorial race in which the margin of victory was expected to be less than five percentage points (e.g., Kansas).

The margin of five percentage points was determined based on the *2014 Cook Political Report*, a widely reputable and respected outlet for predicting spreads in political contests. Notably, the *Cook Political Report* has correctly predicted the result of gubernatorial contests within the margin of error 97.3% of the time (Cook Political Report, 2014).

### ***Speaker and Demographics***

In order to understand characteristics regarding who a speaker is and their affiliations, the following variables were coded: the role of the speaker (journalist or candidate), party affiliation of the candidate (Democrat, Republican, or Independent), and the status of the candidacy (incumbent or challenger), and gender of the speaker.

### *Type of Utterance*

The next variable examines the type of utterance. The following definitions were used:

- (1) **Question:** Any utterance that formulates an inquiry directed at another individual that assumes a response will be given.

*Journalist:* What would be your first priority as governor?

- (2) **Answer:** Any utterance that is an explicit response prompted by a question.

*Journalist:* Did that filibuster kind of inspire you to do the next filibuster? What was your thought process on getting up in front of the Senate and standing for that long for a second time?

*Wendy Davis:* I've always been a fighter. Um, from the moment that I began struggling after my parents got divorced, I've had to fight my way, and it was really a natural extension of that for me. That first filibuster meant so much to me because I found my way out of poverty through education and when I saw that the leadership in this state was bent on cutting five and a half billion dollars from our schools, I knew that someone had to stand up and speak out against it, and I did. And the same last year.

- (3) **Comment:** Any utterance that makes an explicit claim following either an answer or another statement. Statements do not follow a question.

*Journalist:* Governor with all due respect, they've lost confidence in this president by more than 70 percent. [Comment]

*Mary Fallin:* Absolutely. [Comment]

*Journalist:* Absolutely oppose the way he's handling it. [Comment]

Bolden and Robinson (2011) explain that questions can be used because participants are seeking explanation as to why a participant believes something that had previously been said earlier on in the process of discourse. Questions are also used as a means for clarification. Such inquiries might arise out of the two parties misunderstanding based on differences in viewpoints that conflict with one another. Comments, on the other hand, act more freely as a dialogue-building tool to showcase a flow of knowledge rather than inquiry of knowledge.

### ***Tone of Utterance***

Benoit (2004) found that the tone of one's utterance provides insight into how a political candidate chooses to talk about certain issues in their image portrayal. Benoit et al. (2010) explain that the tone of a candidate's utterance illustrate not only what issue was emphasized, but the manner in which candidates believed it would be most effective to have the issue resonate with voters. The tone of the utterance was coded separately dependent on whether the actor was a candidate or a journalist. The tone of utterance for candidates was coded as follows:

- (1) **Acclaims:** positive utterances about the qualities, accomplishment, or desirable proposals of a candidate.

*Jerry Brown:* Yes. Well, I don't need it. But the state's in deep trouble and the next governor needs the preparation, the know-how and the knowledge to fix this state.

And that's what I can offer. And that's why I'm doing it.

- (2) **Attacks:** utterances that identify weaknesses or limitations of an opponent (or an opponent's political party).

*Neil Kashkari:* Well look, Jerry Brown calls it the California Comeback, we're back all the problems are behind us. But if you look at the data, we're number one

in America, 24 percent poverty. We are near the bottom for jobs and we have the worst schools in America. So I don't know where his comeback is.

- (3) **Defenses:** utterances that attempt to refute an attack made against a candidate (or a candidate's political party).

*Charlie Crist:* I haven't had ideological changes over the period of time. What has changed is my former party. About four or five years ago, the leadership I should stress of the republican party really went hard right, candidly and kind of got taken over by the Tea Party.

- (4) **Other:** utterances in which candidates do not make an explicit acclaim, attack or defense.

*Journalist:* So who told you to wait?

*Rick Scott:* Everyone. The whole team told me to wait.

The tone of utterance for journalists was coded as follows:

- (1) **Acclaim:** positive utterances by journalists about the qualities, accomplishment or desirable proposals of the interviewee or their opponent.

*Journalist:* Economic growth has grown at twice the rate of your predecessor.

What would you do to continue this growth in a second turn?

- (2) **Attacks:** utterances that remark or inquire about weaknesses or limitations of the interviewee or their opponent.

*Journalist:* Being a democrat in a republican controlled legislature, it makes sense to question your ability to reach across the aisle. How can voters trust that you'll be able to work with Republicans?

- (3) **Defenses:** utterances that attempt to refute an attack made against the interviewer.

*Journalist:* Gov. Scott has actually increased the number of jobs in the state by nearly 500,000 compared to your tenure. How do you think you can make the argument that you'll be able to bring more jobs to Florida?

- (4) **Other:** utterances in which journalists do not make an explicit acclaim, attack or defense.

*Journalist:* You were our republican governor, you ran as an independent, now you're running as a democrat for governor. Can you explain to us why your ideological changes over the period of time?

### *Topic of Utterance*

To examine the candidates' image construction and their issue ownership, the topic of utterance was coded into the following categories:

- (1) **Issue:** any utterance that concerns governmental action (past, current or future) and problems amenable to government action.

*Gov. Dennis Richardson:* Over the next four years, we have to continue our projection of increasing funding on a per pupil basis and get teachers back to teaching.

- (2) **Character:** any utterance that assess a candidate's characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes of the candidates (or party's).

*Rob Astorino:* If our governor has proven anything, it is that he cannot even keep control of his own party. It would be only in our best interest to question Gov. Cuomo's leadership following his dismantling of his own corruption commission only a few months ago.

- (3) **Mixed:** any utterance that involves an assessment of government action, while also assessing a candidate's (or party's) characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes.

*Rick Scott:* Remember, it was only four years ago that Charlie Crist was a Republican who couldn't get things done. Imagine the time he will have as a democrat in that same office. If we want to continue making progress with small businesses, farmers, and the environment that breeds growth, we cannot have someone who in that office who panders to voters to get elected.

(4) **Other:** any utterance that does not meet the definitions of issue, character or mixed.

After the initial coding of the topic, "issue" was coded into sub-categories. Petrocik (1996) contends that issues are discussed as being a 1) republican owned issue, 2) democrat owned issue, or 3) a performance issue. Petrocik (1996) suggests that the public believe each party could handle different issues more effectively. Consequently, candidates "emphasize issues on which they are advantaged and their opponents are less well regarded" (1996, p. 825).

Brazeal, Benoit, and Airne (2011) found that the public trusted republicans more frequently with issues of moral values, spending/deficit, taxes, and crime. Alternatively, Brazeal et al. (2011) identify the following as democrat owned issues: education, health care, jobs, and environment.

Performance issues are commonly issues that the incumbent has handled poorly and the electorate is looking for new leadership to handle the issue. For example, in Michigan, despite crime being a heavily controlled Republican issue, it is likely to be considered a performance issue given the increase in crime over the incumbent's tenure and has become a focal point of platforms for the gubernatorial race (Newcombe, 2014). As described, unless a topic issue fits a pre-determined list set forth in the coding scheme, it would likely be considered a performance issue. The following categories were adapted from Petrocik's (1996) and Benoit, Airne, and Brazeal (2011):



- (1) **Republican Owned Issue:** any issue utterance, which offers a focus on moral values, spending/deficit, taxes or crime.
- (2) **Democrat Owned Issue:** any issue utterance, which offers a focus on education, health care, jobs or the environment.
- (3) **Performance Issue:** Any utterance about an issue that is considered up for grabs to take ownership over during an election.

After the initial coding, the issue was divided into the following specific categories: moral values, spending/deficit, taxes, crime, education, healthcare, jobs, environment, immigration, or other.

### *Scope of Issue*

Additionally, to investigate the state-federal binary that arises in gubernatorial discourse, “issues” were coded into “federal” or “state” issues. This variable taps into the “us” versus “them” mentality of gubernatorial discourse and also helps to determine whether it is the journalist or the politician who place the area of interest in the federal or state realm.

- (1) **Federal:** Any utterance that assesses the merit or claims an action that is directly related to an agency, person or body of the federal government.

*Bob Beauprez:* The mass of illegal immigrants into Colorado’s borders because of President Obama’s failed agenda must come to an end. That’s the straight, simple truth from someone who just wants to get jobs to hard working citizens.

- (2) **State:** Any utterance that assesses the merit or claims an action that is directly related to an agency, person or body of a state government.

*Thomas Foley:* The reality of the state's economy, Kevin, is that we won't be fiscally solvent in three years if we maintain our current level of spending on erroneous projects at the Governor's discretion.

### ***Agent(s) Involved***

The next variable investigates the agent in their utterance. It is often easy to speak from a personal perspective using one's self as a key source of expertise or testimony to provide credibility to what has been said. However, Taufik (2014) explains that just as credibility is established by talking through a perspective as one's self, it is also established by attributing an assessment of blame or praise to another party. This variable offers context to understanding how gubernatorial candidates might discuss federal issues compared to states issues. Additionally, it offers context for understanding what type of tone a candidate might use in talking about a specific party. Suleiman and O'Connell (2002) establish the agent as being highly influential in the perspective that an interview participant speaks from. As such, the following agents are coded:

- (1) **Candidate:** Utterances that reflect or inquire about the candidate's own, personal ideology, belief or thought process.

*Journalist:* Governor, you're concerned that your opponent would stall tax policies that are necessary to small business growth. How do you see the next four years playing out if your opponent were elected?

- (2) **Opponents:** Utterances that reflect or inquire about a candidate's opponent's character, issue position, or ideology.

*Jeff Johnson:* There is no doubt that Gov. Dayton is a good man, but he has shown over the past four years why he lacks the leadership necessary to help our farmers

obtain what they need. He's a politician, but he doesn't understand what it's like to use his hands on a daily basis for work.

- (3) **DC Elite:** Utterances that reflect, inquire, or attempt to draw a relationship that involves federal politicians.

*Bob Beauprez:* When you're giving thousands of dollars to Obama's re-election campaign, as a voter you have to wonder what his intentions are. I'm not confident that Gov. Hickenlooper will be here to stay for another four more years.

- (4) **Constituents:** Utterances that reflect or inquire about the constituents that a candidate seeks to serve.

*Bruce Rauner:* At the end of the day, the southern Illinois does not want the same brand of politics that have been played out administration after administration in Springfield. And I think the people even in Chicago are starting to recognize that too.

- (5) **Journalists:** Utterances that include a reference to the media and journalists.

*Journalist:* So, when you decided not to take the stage because of the fan, what did you think was the best course of action for the moderators who were journalists to take?

- (6) **Mixed:** Utterances that involves a mixture of any of the four above-mentioned categories.

*Larry Hogan:* Anthony Brown is using this office as his next step to become President. If you want a candidate that cares about who he is making policy for, I'm the only one in the race willing to do so and be real about it.

These variables provide context for a descriptive analysis of how gubernatorial candidates talk in political interviews. The coding scheme can be found in Appendix A.

### **Reliability**

Coding the data involved multiple steps. Initially, a pilot coding session occurred where both the researcher and fellow student coded a small percentage of total utterances. Following that pilot coding session, edits were made to the coding scheme as deemed necessary. Next, the researcher trained another graduate student using a revised coding scheme (see Appendix A). After one hour and forty-five minutes of the training process, the researcher and the graduate student underwent a practice coding session. The researcher and graduate student coded three full interviews together. During this process, the researcher observed the coding by the graduate student to ensure that appropriate understanding of the categories and definitions were being applied. After this training session, both the researcher and the graduate student coded 10% of the total data set individually. Cohen's *kappa* ( $\kappa$ ) was used to determine the consistency between coders for each individual variable based on the 10%. The mean *kappa* suggest an acceptable level of reliability at .86, with the highest at .96 and the lowest at .72. Individual *kappa* results for each variable can be found in Appendix B. All utterances were coded by the researcher. The next chapter highlights findings from the content analysis.

## **Chapter 4 – Findings**

This study offers a descriptive understanding of what gubernatorial discourse looks like in a polarized electoral environment. This chapter illustrates findings from the content analysis according to the following themes: (1) choosing the message, (2) adhering to your party, and (3) the candidate's navigation of the uncontrollable.

### **Choosing the Message: What Gubernatorial Candidates Are Talking About**

Previous research by rhetorical scholars suggests that the emergence of the Tea Party had changed the congenial style of gubernatorial discourse into one of contention and injection of polarizing federal issues on the state and local levels (Atkinson & Leon-Berg, 2012; Wideman, 2011). To examine such a trend empirically, this study analyzed the content of gubernatorial candidates' discourse using the following variables: topic of utterance, scope of issue, and the tone of utterance.

#### ***Talking Issue or Character***

Results from the topic of utterance gubernatorial candidates discussed indicate that candidates more frequently talk about issues (71.3%) compared to any other category. Of the remaining utterances involving gubernatorial candidates, 14.9% as character, .9% as a mixture of both, and 12.9% as utterances that did not fit the definitions of either an issue or a character utterance (Table 1). These findings suggest that interview discourse focuses on issues rather than character.

**Table 1***Demographic and Discourse Variables by Actor*

Variable	Politician (n = 759)	Journalist (n = 765)	Total (n = 1524)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male (n = 1,227)	80.5	80.4	80.5
Female (n = 297)	19.5	19.6	19.5
<b>Utterance Type</b>			
Question (n = 598)	0.5	77.6	39.2
Answer (n = 636)	83.1	0.6	41.7
Comment (n = 290)	16.4	21.8	19.1
<b>Utterance Tone</b>			
Acclaim (n = 432)	42.9	14.0	28.3
Attack (n = 460)	33.6	26.8	30.2
Defense (n = 87)	10.9	0.4	5.7
Other (n = 545)	12.6	58.8	35.8
<b>Utterance Topic</b>			
Issue (n = 1,020)	71.3	61.4	66.9
Character (n = 212)	14.9	12.9	13.9
Mixed (n = 9)	0.9	0.2	0.6
Other (n = 283)	12.9	15.5	18.6
<b>Issue Topic*</b>			
Moral Values (n = 28)	3.3	2.3	2.7
Spending/Deficit (n = 100)	9.8	9.9	9.8
Taxes (n = 134)	13.4	12.6	13.1
Crime (n = 56)	5.3	5.7	5.5
Education (n = 137)	16.0	11.6	13.4
Health Care (n = 56)	4.9	6.1	5.5
Jobs (n = 158)	17.2	13.3	15.5
Environment (n = 30)	3.4	2.7	2.9
Immigration (n = 247)	22.1	26.3	24.2
Other (n = 75)	4.6	9.5	7.4
<b>Issue Ownership*</b>			
Republican (n = 321)	31.2	32.0	31.2
Democrat (n = 389)	41.4	34.3	38.1
Performance (n = 310)	27.4	34.5	30.4
<b>Scope of Issue*</b>			
Federal (n = 209)	20.5	20.7	20.5
State (n = 811)	79.5	80.3	79.5
<b>Agent Involved</b>			
Candidate (n = 973)	55.4	72.2	63.8
Opponent (n = 242)	23.0	8.8	15.9
DC Elite (n = 206)	13.7	13.3	13.6
Constituents (n = 75)	5.9	3.9	4.9
Journalists (n = 8)	0.3	0.7	0.5
Mixed (n = 20)	1.7	1.0	1.3

\*Total utterance count does not include non-issue utterances: politicians (n = 511) and journalists (n = 469).

Such results are meaningful in contrast to what Benoit et al. (2013) found in their analysis of commentaries from gubernatorial, senatorial and mayoral candidates in print news coverage. In their study, Benoit et al. found that 31% of commentaries were focused on candidates' character. This suggests that political interviews tend to be more focused on issues compared to print newspapers.

### ***Talking Federal or State Issues***

Given the previous literature suggesting that federal issues had become a part of gubernatorial discourse, this study examined how often gubernatorial candidates discussed federal issues compared to state issues (RQ1). Out of 1,524 utterances examined in this study, 759 utterances (49.8%) were made by gubernatorial candidates. Results indicate that gubernatorial candidates discussed state issues far more frequently compared to federal issues (79.5% vs. 20.5%,  $\chi^2 = 9.84$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .007$ ). Such a finding confirms Wells et al.'s (2014) assumption that non-presidential candidates are likely to adhere to talking about issues specific to their electorate, rather than focusing on issues of which their electorate cares about only in another type of election (i.e., presidential, senatorial or congressional). In the 2014 gubernatorial elections, candidates followed previously noted discursive trends by focusing on state issues.

While political affiliation may play a role in determining what type of message and to what audience gubernatorial candidates choose to speak during a political interview, results show that there was not much difference in how often democratic and republican candidates discuss the state versus federal issues. Regardless of their party affiliations, candidates seem to recognize that it is safer to play their cards close to home and talk about state issues. Such findings illustrate that while federal issues are polarizing and may excite their base, gubernatorial candidates are still conscious of the fact that state issues are likely what their electorate wants to

hear. Naturally, it makes sense for gubernatorial candidates to talk about federal issues only when it is needed, rather than make it a frequent talking point.

Similarly, the hypothesis that candidates would discuss state issues in constructing their own image (H1) was supported. When constructing their own image, gubernatorial candidates more frequently discussed state issues (62.0%) compared to federal issue (4.8%). Additionally, the hypothesis that candidates would discuss federal issues in constructing their opponent's image (H2) was not supported. Gubernatorial candidates more frequently discussed state issues (80.6%) compared to federal issues (5.7%) when attempting to construct their opponent's image. Such findings fall in line with the trajectory of the findings: gubernatorial candidates maintain their focus on state issues, while complimenting their interview appearances with discussion on federal issues at a less frequent rate.

### ***Talking Federal and State Issues with a Distinct Tone***

Regarding the tone of discourse and how gubernatorial candidates talked about state and federal issues (RQ2), in general, gubernatorial candidates more frequently spoke of acclaims compared to attacks (42.9% vs. 33.6%,  $\chi^2 = 23.38$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .003$ ). However, in relation to other types of discourse, interview discourse seems to offer less room for acclaim. For instance, Benoit et al. (2013) found that 53% of issue utterances in newspaper coverage were acclaims (Benoit et al., 2013), while de Nooy and Maier (2014) indicate that 59% of issue utterances in televised debates were coded as acclaims. This could be due to the candidates' adherence to answering the question provided by the journalist, which might not offer copious amounts of room to praise their own accomplishments.

When looking specifically at issue utterances from candidates, candidates used attacks (40.5%) and acclaims (39.4%) at a similar rate. Based on issue utterances only, findings suggest



that gubernatorial candidates talk about state and federal issues in a distinct tone. Candidates talked about state issues with a positive tone 42.9% of the time, while federal issues were discussed in a positive tone only 24.8% (Table 2), and the difference was significant ( $\chi^2 = 121.168$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Such findings confirm previous research by Benoit et al. (2013) who suggested that when talking about issues affecting their electorate, candidates are more likely to acclaim the situation or their actions. Alternatively, among all issues, a negative tone when discussing federal issues arose 67.2% of the time and a negative tone with state issues arose 33.2% of the time.

**Table 2**

*Tone of Utterance by Scope of Issue*

Tone	Federal (n = 113)	State (n = 438)	Total (n = 551)
Acclaim (n = 216)	24.8	42.9	39.4
Attacks (n = 222)	67.2	33.2	40.5
Defenses (n = 68)	6.2	13.8	12.4
Other (n = 42)	1.8	9.1	7.7

Additionally notable is the frequency of defense in their utterances. Gubernatorial candidates used defense in their utterances 12.4% of the time compared 4.3% of the time in to televised debates (Benoit, Brazeal & Airne, 2007) and 6% in newspaper coverage (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Considering the back-and-forth discourse that often arises in interviews, this makes sense that candidates might feel more inclined to be on the defensive than in other discursive settings. Candidate defense utterances arose when provoked through an issue attack by a journalist that often was not meant to be an attack against the candidate, but an attack on the method of how they have faired on policy implementation. The following is an example through

journalist Peter Long's (2014) interview with Kansas republican gubernatorial incumbent Sam Brownback:

*Journalist:* Our job growth is worse than surrounding states and it's slower than the nation.

*Sam Brownback:* Well no but I'm just asking you to compare our surrounding states long-term, Peter. Not short term. If we view it as a long-term investment, then eventually, we'll see our numbers rise.

Finally, it is worth noting that journalists were more likely to attack a candidate (26.8%) than acclaim a candidate (14.0%). This falls in line with previous research indicating aggressive journalism (Baum & Groeling, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that gubernatorial discourse emphasizes a distinct tone when talking with federal or state issues. Most commonly associating federal issues with a negative tone and state issues are allowed to be more fluid between being framed through either a negative or positive tone.

### **Talking Your Party: How Party Affiliation Influences Gubernatorial Discourse**

Petrocik (1996) explained that a political party's ownership over political issues plays a vital role in understanding the functionality of how candidates manage political discourse. Based on the introduction of party affiliation in the last section, this project's third research question dealt with how issue ownership and party affiliation influence gubernatorial discourse. It should be noted that this question is examined in a political setting with a democratic president and a democratically controlled congress. To provide insight, the following two variables were examined: issue ownership and issue topic.

### ***Issue Ownership and Party Affiliation***

Results indicate that party affiliation does not seem to play a role in whether candidates opt to stick to purely party-owned issues. Instead, gubernatorial candidates appear to more freely move from republican issues to democratic issues. Based on the political environment in the 2014-midterm elections, gubernatorial candidates preferred to speak on democratic issues (41.4%) compared to republican issues (31.2%). This finding arises despite Petrocik's (1996) analysis that republican issues were more welcomed by the electorate compared to democratic issues. While democrats more frequently talked about democratic issues than republicans (47.7% vs. 36.5%), no significance was found to suggest one party owned a party's issues over the other (Table 3). Uniquely, democrats talked about republican issues slightly more frequently than republicans (32.9% vs. 29.6%), but the difference was not significant.

However, there was a significant difference between democrats and republicans in the use of performance issues ( $\chi^2 = 18.84$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Republicans were more likely to discuss performance issues within a state compared to democrats (33.6% vs. 14.5%). This is in direct contrast to previous studies, which suggest that democrats are more likely to talk about performance issues (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003; Rhea & Chattopadhyay, 2014). As Petrocik (1996) explains, republican issues are received better with the majority of voters compared to democratic issues. Consequently, democrats tend to use performance issues as a mechanism to bridge the gap. However, in gubernatorial discourse, and in the format of interview discourse, it appears that republicans are the ones who were willing to bridge the gap.

**Table 3***Demographic and Discourse Variables by Party Affiliation*

Variable	Democrat (n = 350)	Republican (n = 409)	Total (n = 759)
<b>Candidate Status</b>			
Incumbent (n = 235)	11.7	47.3	30.9
Challenger (n = 534)	88.3	52.7	69.1
<b>Gender</b>			
Male (n = 611)	76.6	83.9	80.5
Female (n = 148)	23.4	16.1	19.5
<b>Utterance Type</b>			
Question (n = 4)	0.3	0.7	0.5
Answer (n = 630)	86.3	80.2	83.1
Comment (n = 125)	13.4	19.1	16.4
<b>Utterance Tone</b>			
Acclaim (n = 216)	44.0	42.0	42.9
Attack (n = 222)	32.6	34.4	33.6
Defense (n = 68)	10.0	11.7	10.9
Other (n = 42)	13.4	12.0	12.7
<b>Utterance Topic</b>			
Issue (n = 551)	68.9	73.5	71.3
Character (n = 113)	19.7	10.7	14.9
Mixed (n = 7)	0.6	1.2	0.9
Other (n = 88)	10.8	14.6	12.9
<b>Issue Topic*</b>			
Moral Values (n = 18)	4.5	2.3	3.3
Spending/Deficit (n = 54)	9.5	10.1	9.8
Taxes (n = 74)	13.2	13.7	13.4
Crime (n = 29)	8.6	2.6	5.3
Education (n = 82)	21.0	10.9	16.0
Health Care (n = 27)	7.8	2.6	4.9
Jobs (n = 95)	14.8	19.2	17.2
Environment (n = 19)	1.6	4.8	3.4
Immigration (n = 122)	14.8	28.1	22.1
Other (n = 31)	4.2	6.8	4.6
<b>Issue Ownership*</b>			
Republican (n = 172)	32.9	29.6	31.2
Democrat (n = 228)	47.7	36.5	41.4
Performance (n = 148)	14.5	33.6	27.4
<b>Level of Issue*</b>			
Federal (n = 113)	15.4	24.6	20.5
State (n = 438)	84.6	75.4	79.5
<b>Agent Involved</b>			
Candidate (n = 420)	56.9	54.1	55.4
Opponent (n = 175)	27.1	19.5	23.0
DC Elite (n = 104)	7.4	19.0	13.7
Constituents (n = 45)	7.1	4.9	5.9
Journalists (n = 2)	0.3	0.2	0.3
Mixed (n = 12)	0.9	2.2	1.7

\* Total utterance count does not include non-issue utterances (n = 551).

On the other hand, 30.9% of utterances made by democratic gubernatorial candidates were coded as character or other non-identifiable utterances. However, the political environment in which the election occurred could be influential in how democrats spoke in these midterm elections. With the President being a democrat with low approval ratings (Rasmussen, 2014), it is possible that democrats felt it was unsafe to discuss more democratic issues, and issues in general, with the knowledge that voters were not fans of how a notable democrat was handling the issues.

In addition to party affiliation, yet falling in line with issue ownership, particular notice should also be provided toward whether the candidate was an incumbent or challenger. Significance was found between issue ownership and candidate status ( $\chi^2 = 11.35$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically, incumbents (33%) were far more likely to talk about a performance issue compared to challengers (23.6%). Considering that 82.6% of all republican candidates were incumbents (Table 4), such a finding makes sense based on republican's higher frequency of performance issue utterances. Such a finding also falls in line with previous studies (Petrocik, 1996; Rhea & Chattopadhyay, 2014) that suggest incumbents will talk more frequently about performance issues because they find themselves defending their original approach to the political situation.

### ***Issue Topics and Party Affiliation***

Moving on specific issues, Republicans talked about immigration ahead of any other issue (28.1%), while democrats talked about immigration to a lesser degree (14.8%). Alternatively, democrats spoke about education twice as much as republicans (21% vs. 10.9%).

**Table 4***Demographic and Discourse Variables by Candidate Status*

Variable	Incumbent (n = 235)	Challenger (n = 524)	Total (n = 759)
<b>Political Affiliation</b>			
Democrat (n = 350)	17.4	58.9	46.1
Republican (n = 409)	82.6	41.1	53.9
<b>Gender</b>			
Male (n = 611)	72.8	84.0	80.5
Female (n = 148)	27.2	16.0	19.5
<b>Utterance Type</b>			
Question (n = 4)	1.3	0.2	0.5
Answer (n = 630)	73.2	87.4	83.1
Comment (n = 125)	25.5	12.4	16.4
<b>Utterance Tone</b>			
Acclaim (n = 216)	44.7	42.1	42.9
Attack (n = 222)	28.5	35.8	33.6
Defense (n = 68)	13.6	9.7	10.9
Other (n = 42)	13.2	12.4	12.7
<b>Utterance Topic</b>			
Issue (n = 551)	75.3	69.5	71.3
Character (n = 113)	9.8	17.1	14.9
Mixed (n = 7)	1.7	0.6	0.9
Other (n = 88)	13.2	12.8	12.9
<b>Issue Topic*</b>			
Moral Values (n = 18)	0.0	4.9	3.3
Spending/Deficit (n = 54)	10.4	9.5	9.8
Taxes (n = 74)	10.4	14.9	13.4
Crime (n = 29)	3.8	6.0	5.3
Education (n = 82)	12.1	16.3	16.0
Health Care (n = 27)	2.2	6.2	4.9
Jobs (n = 95)	22.5	14.6	17.2
Environment (n = 19)	4.9	2.7	3.4
Immigration (n = 122)	30.2	18.2	22.1
Other (n = 31)	3.5	6.7	4.6
<b>Issue Ownership*</b>			
Republican (n = 172)	25.8	33.9	31.2
Democrat (n = 228)	41.2	41.5	41.4
Performance (n = 148)	33.0	23.6	27.4
<b>Level of Issue*</b>			
Federal (n = 113)	30.2	15.3	20.5
State (n = 438)	69.8	83.7	79.5
<b>Agent Involved</b>			
Candidate (n = 420)	60.4	53.1	55.4
Opponent (n = 175)	7.7	29.9	23.0
DC Elite (n = 104)	25.1	8.6	13.7
Constituents (n = 45)	3.4	7.1	5.9
Journalists (n = 2)	0.4	0.2	0.3
Mixed (n = 12)	3.0	1.1	1.7

\* Total utterance count does not include non-issue utterances (n = 551).

Additionally, when examining issue ownership through a scope of the federal and state issues, significance was found with gubernatorial candidates and talking about immigration in a federal context ( $\chi^2 = 39.2$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p < .004$ ). Of all federal issue utterances, the issue topic of immigration outweighed at a frequency of 40.2% of the time (Table 5). This result makes sense considering that immigration has been a polarizing issue at the federal level in 2015. This comes with the knowledge that immigration is largely considered a Republican issue (Petrocik, 1996), confirmed through 70.5% of all immigration issue utterances were by republicans, with the remaining 29.5% of immigration utterances being from democrats (Table 3).

**Table 5**

*Issue Topic by Scope of Issue*

Issue Topic	Federal (n = 112)	State (n = 436)	Total (n = 551)
Moral Values (n = 18)	5.4	2.5	3.3
Spending/Deficit (n = 54)	12.5	9.2	9.8
Taxes (n = 74)	2.7	16.3	13.4
Crime (n = 29)	0.9	6.4	5.3
Education (n = 82)	7.1	17.0	16.0
Health Care (n = 27)	9.8	3.7	4.9
Jobs (n = 95)	7.1	20.0	17.2
Environment (n = 19)	9.8	1.8	3.4
Immigration (n = 122)	40.2	17.2	22.1
Other (n = 31)	4.5	6.0	4.6

Finally, what was intriguing is the lack of moral value utterances across democrats (4.5%) and especially republicans (2.3%). Petrocik (1996) explains that issues of moral values have empirically been associated as a republican stronghold with regard to issue ownership. However, it appears that in gubernatorial contests in 2014 it was nothing more than a brief

mention. In sum, gubernatorial candidates do not seem to be restricted to one's party to the same degree as other candidates or forms of discourse.

### **How Gubernatorial Candidates Navigate Where They Are: The Uncontrollable**

While findings thus far have provided a better understanding of the discursive choices that gubernatorial candidates make during a political interview, this section unpacks how the uncontrollable variables might influence gubernatorial candidates' discourse. The fourth and final research question inquired into whether the scene of the interview, media outlet, or competitiveness of the race might influence gubernatorial discourse during political interviews.

#### ***How the Scene Influences the Discourse***

Results show that the scene of the interview influences what gubernatorial candidates talk about in political interviews. As Table 6 indicates, spending/deficit issues were more likely to be brought up in purple states compared to any other scene of the interview ( $\chi^2 = 39.2$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p < .006$ ). Surprisingly, gubernatorial candidates in red states did not talk about spending/deficit issues as much as the other two scenes. Such a finding provides further context to how gubernatorial candidates are not likely to adhere to common issue ownership principles established by Petrocik (1996).

In addition, candidates in solid red states more frequently discussed federal issues (20.8%) compared to solid blue states (8.7%) and purple states (5.3%), and the difference was significant ( $\chi^2 = 28.8$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Such difference makes sense when one considers the presence of a democratic president in office. Republicans view the DC elite as easy targets for attack as previously discussed through the variable of tone. Additionally, in purple states, candidates are hesitant to talk about federal issues due to their aforementioned polarizing nature.



**Table 6***Issue Topic by Scene of the Interview*

Issue Topic	Blue State (n = 132)	Red State (n = 312)	Purple State (n = 107)	Total (n = 551)
Moral Values (n = 18)	3.0	3.2	3.7	3.2
Spending/Deficit (n = 54)	9.8	7.4	16.8	10.0
Taxes (n = 74)	12.1	14.4	13.1	13.5
Crime (n = 29)	9.8	4.8	0.9	5.3
Education (n = 82)	12.9	16.7	12.1	15.0
Health Care (n = 27)	2.3	7.4	0.9	4.9
Jobs (n = 95)	15.9	16.67	20.6	17.3
Environment (n = 19)	3.8	4.5	0.0	3.5
Immigration (n = 122)	21.2	21.2	26.2	22.3
Other (n = 31)	9.1	3.8	6.5	5.7

Speaking in support or against federal issues or the DC elite could alter their image for the worse among a group of the electorate. In a purple state, a small group could be the swing vote.

Next, the scene of the interview influenced who was brought up in gubernatorial discourse. There was a significant relationship between the scene of the interview and the agent involved ( $\chi^2 = 41.23$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Whereas candidates in blue states and purple states mentioned the DC elite only 7.1% and 6% of the time, respectively, those in red states mentioned the DC elite 19.3% of the time (Table 7). These results provide insight into why candidates in red states only talked about their opponents 17.5% of the time, compared to blue states (31.5%) and purple states (28.5%). Gubernatorial candidates in safely held red states likely did not view their opponent as a threat or the most opportune agent involved. Instead, in adhering to the past political discursive trends of maintaining a savior and a villain in electoral discourse, gubernatorial candidates in red states appeared to identify the DC elite as their villain.

**Table 7***Agent Involved by Scene of Interview*

Agent Involved	Blue State (n = 184)	Red State (n = 424)	Purple State (n = 151)	Total (n = 759)
Candidate (n = 420)	54.3	54.5	58.9	55.4
Opponent (n = 175)	31.5	17.5	28.5	23.0
DC Elite (n = 104)	7.1	19.3	6.0	13.7
Constituents (n = 45)	6.5	6.4	4.0	5.9
Journalists (n = 2)	.0	0.2	0.7	0.3
Mixed (n = 12)	0.5	2.1	2.0	1.6

Such an explanation makes sense when considering that 82.6% of all republican utterances were from incumbent candidates. Results reveal a significant difference between the status of candidates and who they addressed ( $\chi^2 = 163.77$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Incumbents far more frequently talked about the DC elite (25.1%) compared to their opponent (8.6%). Alternatively, challengers talked about the DC elite only 8.6% of the time, while they talked about their opponents 29.9% of the time. In attempting to identify the villain, incumbents put the DC elite in that role whereas challengers input their opponents as the ones to attack.

These findings suggest that the context of the political interview has an influence on how gubernatorial candidates talk. Considering the political context of the 2014 midterm elections and a democrat as President, gubernatorial candidates are likely to bring up continuously divisive issues – such as spending/deficit – in purple states, candidates in red states frequently discuss federal issues compared to purple states and, when appropriate, the DC elite can act as the villain in red states.

### *How the Media Outlet Influences Discourse*

Whether the media outlet was a national or local platform had an impact on candidates' tone of utterance ( $\chi^2 = 12.21$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .007$ ). Specifically, candidates were more likely to use acclaim during the interview appeared in local outlets (45.8%) compared to national outlets (32.5%). On the other hand, candidates were more likely to use attacks (44.2%) during the interview in national outlets compared to local outlets (30.7%) (Table 8).

In addition, journalists were more likely to speak in a negative tone about a candidate than speak in a positive tone with the candidate (26.8% vs. 14.0%,  $\chi^2 = 2.08$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p < .048$ ). This falls in line with previous research indicating a more aggressive, watchdog style of journalism with regard to political events (Baym, 2013). However, falling in line with how candidates spoke, journalists on local outlets took a positive tone more frequently at 15.2% of the time compared to those on national outlets at 9.5% of the time (Table 9). Alternatively, they spoke with a negative tone 32.7% of the time on national outlets compared to 25.1% of the time on local outlets.

**Table 8**

*Media Outlet by Candidate's Tone of Utterance*

Outlet	Acclaim (n = 326)	Attack (n = 255)	Defense (n = 82)	Other (n = 96)
National (n = 163)	32.5	44.2	11.0	12.3
Local (n = 596)	45.8	30.7	10.7	12.8

**Table 9***Media Outlet by Journalist's Tone of Utterance*

Outlet	Acclaim (n = 107)	Attack (n = 205)	Defense (n = 4)	Other (n = 450)
National (n = 168)	9.5	32.7	0.0	57.7
Local (n = 597)	15.2	25.1	0.7	59.0

***How Competitiveness of Race Influences Discourse***

Finally, findings indicate that the competitiveness of the race influenced the tone of utterance used in political interviews. Notably, candidates in toss up states were more likely to use a defensive tone compared to those in solid republican states ( $\chi^2 = 16.14$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .013$ ). In toss up races, defense was used 15.2% of the time, whereas in solid republican races a defensive tone was only used 6.9% of the time (Table 10). This finding makes sense as illustrated by Benoit, Brazeal, and Airne (2007) who found that competitive elections were more likely to experience less acclaims and are made up through defense mechanisms in an effort to not necessarily advance their reputation, but protect their established reputation.

**Table 10***Competitiveness of Race by Tone of Utterance*

Competitiveness	Acclaim (n = 326)	Attack (n = 255)	Defense (n = 82)	Other (n = 96)	Total (n = 759)
Solid Republican (n = 360)	44.7	34.2	6.9	14.2	47.4
Solid Democrat (n = 76)	34.2	42.1	10.5	13.2	10.0
Toss Up (n = 323)	43.0	31.0	15.2	10.8	42.6

This chapter revealed descriptive findings for what gubernatorial interview discourse looks like. In the context of the 2014-midterm elections, gubernatorial candidates talked about

primarily state issues. However, when talking about those issues, they were not afraid to use a negative tone. Additionally, gubernatorial candidates did not strictly adhere to issue ownership as found through presidential, senatorial, and congressional discourse. They were more likely to trespass on the other party's owned issues. Furthermore, the scene and environment in which gubernatorial candidates spoke also seem to influence how they discursively engage with journalists.

Specifically, gubernatorial candidates aptly managed when it is appropriate to talk about state issues or federal issues. State issues are the focal point of gubernatorial discourse, with federal issues brought up to attack their identified villain. Consequently, state issues define their image. However, findings suggested that it is possible for gubernatorial candidates to attempt to define their opponents as a villain through discussing federal issues. Similarly, when candidates do opt to talk about federal issues, they do so with the current political landscape in mind, only discussing current and well-known federal events that their state audience would readily recognize. In doing so, gubernatorial incumbents criticize the handling of well-known federal issues in an effort to construct the DC elite as their villain in the election.

Next, gubernatorial candidates in political interviews do not adhere to issue ownership as other political candidates in other discursive forms. Instead, candidates seemingly ease between democratic and republican issues. Their image is not defined by their party, instead they choose their own issues to define their own unique image. Alternatively, gubernatorial discourse is influenced by the media outlet in which they speak, the type of state they run in, and how competitive their race is. Such uncontrollable variables by gubernatorial candidates play an influential role in determining how restricted candidates are to constructing their opponent's image or even their own and what types of issue topics are most effective. Based on this study's

findings, there is ample room for discussion on what this means for the advancement of our understanding of gubernatorial discourse.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion**

This study sought to uncover how gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their image in the context of an increasingly polarized environment. This study reveals that gubernatorial candidates are conscientious of who their audience is, yet not so cautious as Hart's (2000) previous assertion to play it safe. Additionally, gubernatorial candidates do not adhere to purely a party message. Rather, they transcend party lines and establish their own message – a gubernatorial message. This chapter focuses on the theoretical and practical implications of these results.

### **Theoretical Implications**

To understand how gubernatorial discourse functions in an increasingly polarized political environment, this study examined the role of issue ownership, image construction, and the unique platform that political interviews offer to understand gubernatorial discourse. This section illustrates how this study provides insight into existing literature and contributes to the literature.

### ***Polarization and Scope of the Issue***

The findings of this study offer great insight into how gubernatorial candidates handle the media and manage their interest in both federal and state issues. Such insight can be found through the general scope of issues, how and when gubernatorial candidates employed different tone, and how they linked various political actors to state and federal issues in their discourse. First, gubernatorial candidates make discursive decisions based on what their electorate wants to hear—issues affecting them locally. Despite past literature suggesting that gubernatorial candidates operate in an environment that foster more discourse focused on federal issues (Atkinson & Leon-Berg, 2012; Wideman, 2011), this investigation revealed that gubernatorial

candidates are still state-centered. Such a finding suggests that gubernatorial candidates are aware and conscious that they have to play to their state's electorate.

Admittedly, the fact that gubernatorial candidates are *willing* to talk about federal issues more than one-fifths of the time (20.5%) despite having no authority over those issues merits attention. While state issues remain to be the most salient topic of gubernatorial discourse, such frequency of federal issues illustrates that gubernatorial candidates use federal issues in their arsenal. Sheffield (2010) found that focusing on divisive federal issues on local platforms spurs a party's base to action. Consequently, gubernatorial candidates could be using federal issues as a tool to elicit support and ground troops for their candidacy. Such analysis renders the conclusion that while gubernatorial candidates are *willing* to talk about federal issues, they are still *required* to discuss state issues.

From a holistic overview, the fact that candidates felt compelled to focus so heavily on issues in general is a distinct trend compared to past literature that examined discourse through other media platforms. For instance, television debates saw only 65% of utterances that focused on issues (de Nooy, 2014), television advertisements found only 56% (Benoit et al., 2010), and newspaper coverage 58% of the time (Benoit, Airne, & Brazeal, 2010). Such a finding suggests that political interview discourse—regardless of federal or a state scope—is influential in ensuring that political candidates talk about the issues. The unscripted dialogue that ensues with the gubernatorial candidate suggests that when candidates are unable to have a scripted response, they default to talk about issues, rather than character. Wells et al. (2014) suggests that when candidates focus on the issues in elections rather than character, they are more likely to construct an image that appears as more credible and qualified for the position.



Second, in this polarized environment of talking between federal or state issues, gubernatorial candidates opted to speak with a unique tone that influenced how their image was constructed. Noticeably, gubernatorial candidates were unafraid to talk about federal issues in a negative tone. Instead, as indicated in Table 2, a heavy majority of federal utterances were attacks. However, it was mostly republicans who were attacking the federal issues. Such a trend makes sense considering the makeup of the President's office in 2014. If the President were to be considered the sitting incumbent, opposing parties would attack the incumbent presidential party far more often than the alternative (Benoit et al., 2010). Thus, gubernatorial candidates are no different – they attack the divisive and well-known opponent of their party. If they are unable to attack their challenger directly, then they assume they can construct their opponent's image through an attack of their party's leader – the president.

As Wideman (2011) and Atkinson and Leon-Berg (2012) suggest, we live in polarizing and divisive times compared to previous years. In line with this larger trend, this study revealed that there were slightly more attacks (40.5%) on issues compared to acclaims (39.4%) in gubernatorial discourse. This confirms Benoit et al.'s (2010) findings that electoral discourse was transforming into a more negative tone. What this overarching trend means for political discourse is that negative discourse is growing at the state and local levels. Considering how prideful and positive gubernatorial and local discourse was merely ten or fifteen years ago, it is safe to say that state and local political discourse is undergoing transformation.

Finally, this study confirmed what was suggested by previous research that local and statewide candidates often attempt to tie their opponents to the DC elite through federal issues (Atkinson & Leon-Berg, 2012; Sheffield, 2010; Wideman, 2011). This pattern was found more frequently with regard to incumbents. Such a finding is notable because prior studies found

challengers are more likely to attack the incumbents due to their established ties with the DC elite (Sheffield, 2010). In gubernatorial discourse, when candidates attack each other, it is frequently issues related (94.6%). Consequently, how someone has performed on an issue during their time in political office plays a role in how they might be attacked. For incumbents, their challengers might not have an issue and policy record for which they can attack. Thus, they need someone with a divisive policy record to identify as the villain in the election. The DC elites fill that villain role. For instance, incumbent South Carolina governor Nikki Haley told local affiliate WCBD (2015) in an interview when speaking about her opponent:

“Just last week, Representative Clyburn was speaking with my opponent at a rally for jobs, saying that our economy would grow with Mr. Sheehen in office. Until Representative Clyburn and rest of Congress is able to fix the mess they’ve made of our national economy, he is in no position to speak about job creation. Him and Congress have to start focusing on solutions that will help create the jobs we need before I believe a word he says.”

Gubernatorial candidates are in a unique position to maneuver between identifying the villain in an electoral race to either their gubernatorial opponent or the DC elite. Whereas congressional, senatorial and presidential candidates tend to focus on other federal actors to attack (Sheffield, 2010), gubernatorial actors do not have to operate purely on the state level when picking someone to blame or praise. Instead, and unsurprisingly, they use the DC elite as a political tool to attack a villain and portray an image that they are willing to stand up for what is right to voters. If nothing else, gubernatorial discourse in this polarized environment exhibits one repeating element: gubernatorial candidates tend to create the image of the villain as either their

opponent or their opponent's assume friends (i.e., DC elite) that assumes an "us versus them" image of their electoral race.

Naturally, candidates opt to stay on the offensive by attempting to attach negative qualities to their opponent. The unique discursive move gubernatorial candidates take compared to presidential candidates is when they discursively attack politicians that are not at their political level. Such a move assumes that gubernatorial candidates, even though they are playing for a statewide audience, want to be perceived by their intended audience as having the power to strong arm and effectively handle the DC elite. Consequently, in gubernatorial discourse, when a candidate attacks a federal politician, it is used as a move to showcase one's power and ability.

### ***Issue Ownership in Gubernatorial Discourse***

To explore how issue ownership functions in constructing a candidate's image in this hyperpolarized context, this study applied a modified version of Petrocik's (1996) issue ownership theory to gubernatorial discourse. On the contrary to Petrocik's theory and Benoit et al.'s (2013) assumption for lower-level elections that candidates still maintain adherence to their party's owned issues, there was no discernable pattern for gubernatorial discourse on whether republicans or democrats owned their own party's issues in the 2014 election cycle. Instead, this study revealed that both parties seemed to focus on democratic issues during political interviews. This conclusion comes with the finding that only 38% of republican attacks were on democratic issues. Thus, gubernatorial candidates, specifically republican candidates, are more likely to trespass party lines and talk about democratic state issues than democrats to talk about republican state issues. Keeping in mind the polarized political context of the 2014 midterm elections, such a finding suggests that when it comes to defining one's self through state issues, gubernatorial candidates refuse to be restricted to just their own party's issues. Instead, discourse in the 2014

midterms suggested a willingness to trespass on the other party's owned issues when they believe it is appropriate.

Additionally, prior studies (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003; Rhea & Chattopadhyay, 2014) found that democrats far more frequently take on performance issues in an attempt to define and distinguish themselves from their opponents. However, this study suggests that republicans were far more likely to engage in discussion about performance issues. As a whole, performance issues were more frequently discussed compared to what past literature indicates. Such could be an indication that gubernatorial candidates might actually be willing to take a risk, go beyond party boundaries and define themselves or their opponent's image through the context of the unknown. However, such findings could also be due to the unique political environment in 2014 that contained a Congress and President with low approval ratings and have largely been considered unproductive. Petrocik (1996) describes performance issues as an inherently unknown issue whose control will not be decided until after the election, if even then. In honing in on such issues, gubernatorial candidates may be taking a risk in an effort to showcase a unique image compared to their opponent.

In sum, issue ownership is not well defined with regard to gubernatorial candidates. Gubernatorial candidates appear to play their environment, their constituents and the variables involved more so than playing true to their party-owned issues. If anything, gubernatorial candidates are willing to take chances with how they opt to construct their image through issues, rather than purely adhering to an image constructed through party-owned issues.

Next, gubernatorial candidates' status influenced the issues discussed. Gubernatorial candidates fall in line with incumbents across any political office. Incumbents talk more about performance issues because they find themselves more frequently defending their administration

or office's policies compared to challengers who do not have a similar issue record. In doing so, gubernatorial incumbent candidates allow the audience to play a role in constructing their image. Whatever the electorate opts for with regard to issues they believe need to be addressed, incumbents take that call to ownership to heart in their image construction. So, in most cases, gubernatorial candidates construct an image that mirrors the issues that their electorate has iterated is of concern to them—more so than even presidential candidates.

Finally, This study's findings indicate that gubernatorial candidates have no problem discussing issues that are owned by the other party. Consequently, there exists an important implication with regard to how candidates trespass on another party's owned issues. This study suggests two unique frames that gubernatorial candidates used in trespassing on issues owned by their opponent's party. First, talking about issues through a federal scope allows gubernatorial candidates to trespass on their opponent's party issues. Findings suggest that when candidates talk about their party-owned issues, they do so through a scope of a state issue. However, when gubernatorial candidates trespass, they trespass by attacking the DC elite on an issue through a federal scope. For instance, it was common for republican gubernatorial candidates to talk about immigration policy through a federal scope and not as a state issue. That federal scope offers a unique vehicle that gubernatorial candidates use to trespass on their opponent's owned issues. Instead of talking about immigration through what the media and audience expect as a state issue considering the office they are running for, republican candidates speak of it through a new lens that provides a new perspective on how to view the issue. Consequently, Rhea and Chattopadhyay (2014) explain that if doubt can be illustrated in how a party owns or even perceives an issue, then the other party has the chance to take ownership away and claim it for themselves.

Additionally, this study suggests that even when talking about state issues, gubernatorial candidates would trespass when they would speak in a negative tone about their opponent's position on the issue (72.4%). Trespassing on another party's owned issue by employing a negative tone provides a second unique discursive frame that candidates can use to supplant ownership over an opposite party owned issue. Rhea and Chattopadhyay (2014) explain that tarnishing the credibility of a political candidate's issue position is effective in taking ownership away from that candidate. Thus, talking about issues in a federal scope and a negative tone could be used as mechanisms for candidates to trespass on the other party's owned issues.

### ***Pre-Destined Discourse: Managing the Provided Image***

In managing the seemingly uncontrollable variables, gubernatorial candidates seem to adapt their discourse. First, gubernatorial discourse sounds different based on the media outlet. Gubernatorial candidates were more likely to use a positive tone (i.e., acclaim) in local outlets compared to national outlets. Alternatively, candidates tended to use a negative tone (i.e., attack) more frequently in national outlets compared to local outlets. This mirrors the findings for journalists. As Baym (2013) points out, a more aggressive style of journalism was used in national media outlets. Journalists representing national outlets were more likely to attack, provoke and pressure gubernatorial candidates over the course of the interview.

Even in this polarized environment, it appears that gubernatorial candidates have adapted a way to construct their image distinctly depending on the media outlet: constructing their images through acclaims on local outlets, while showcasing an image of being firm and tough with villains on national outlets. The attacks appearing on national news media complement the image constructed through acclaims on local outlets by showcasing candidates as mainly nice, but with an ability to fight when need be. As such, local outlets provide the image of a relatable,

down-to-earth person while national outlets allow candidates to showcase themselves as political hawks, looking out for the every-day American. Such a trend is similar to presidential discourse when engaging with the news media (Cohen, 2009). Cohen argues that presidential candidates use the local outlets to influence public opinion by showcasing themselves as a reputable, yet relatable candidate. Based on the results presented here, gubernatorial candidates undergo the same process in their engagement with the media. Arguably, because gubernatorial candidates interact with voters face-to-face more frequently than do presidential candidates, it is quite possible that gubernatorial candidates must work harder to appear as more relatable compared to presidential candidates (through local outlets), and also as a credible and reputable leader who is ready to fight (through national outlets).

Second, the setting of the election – red, blue, or purple state – played a role in shaping gubernatorial discourse. Candidates in solid red states preferred to talk about federal issues compared to blue or purple states. This could be due to having a democratic president in office. Talking about current issues that riles up the majority of their base in the state is an easy way to connect with voters who watch politically partisan news outlets. Findings suggest that it is common in red states for gubernatorial candidates – including democratic gubernatorial candidates (e.g., Iowa, Michigan, and Nebraska) – to craft their image as a leader of the opposition to the DC elite in Washington. This conclusion is further validated through findings that indicate candidates from red states attack the DC elite far more frequently than any other states.

Such a conclusion illustrates that where the political contest is located might create the context for the type of role a candidate can take on. In this case, it was the vocal opposition representing the state to President Obama's administration. Alternatively, in blue states,

democratic gubernatorial candidates didn't feel the need to take the same approach with a republican figure at the helm of the speaker's office in the House. This could be interpreted from the notion that the President's office has become inherently more polarizing than any congressional office (Sheffield, 2010). Recognition of this environmental variable by gubernatorial candidates is particularly interesting when considering the inherent nature of a president is to be moderate, whereas the more polarizing figures of a party are often found in Congress (Stevens et al., 2006). As such, gubernatorial candidates in red states could be using the polarizing feature of the Presidency to accept a pre-constructed image for them as the state's vocal leader in opposition to a President's administration.

### **Practical Implication**

In addition to providing theoretical implications for how gubernatorial candidates construct their own and their opponent's image, this research offers a practical implication with regard to media outlets. The use of both local and national outlets by gubernatorial candidates provides a possible mechanism for ensuring the media and audience members obtain a holistic representation of who the candidate is.

### ***Checks and Balances by Media Outlets***

Initially, the distinct styles of discourse that arise from both national and local media outlets provide the opportunity for the electorate to see a holistic image of who their gubernatorial candidates are. Baym (2013) explains that political interview through national outlets are consumed with the intent to view the candidate as a tough candidate willing to go to battle on the issues. Alternatively, consumers watch local outlets to gain new insight or knowledge about the character or unknown issue stances of the political candidate (Sheffield, 2010). These premises illuminate the findings of this study.



Notably, viewers watch local outlets and expect to hear candidates talking in a positive way about their stances on issues and their quality of character. Such is illustrated when 16.8% of utterances arising in local media outlets were about a candidate's character, while only 3.4% of all utterances in national outlets were about character. Such insight could offer an explanation that local outlets are used as a mechanism to ensure candidates pass the eye test and are a candidate with whom the electorate can find common ground (Sheffield, 2010).

Alternatively, in national news outlets, viewers watch these broadcasts for a more humanistic instinct: entertainment. As Baym (2013) explains, consumers watch partisan national news outlets for the entertainment that could occur, not necessarily the knowledge. In most cases, the journalist takes a more aggressive stance compared to more local outlets because he or she recognizes that aggressiveness and drama is what the audience expects (Scheffield, 2010).

Consequently, gubernatorial candidates are more aggressive on these outlets to respond to the increase in aggressiveness from journalists. They offer an image of someone who has a tough-minded attitude and a willingness to discursively fight with the media for what they believe is right. The potential for this discursive battle with a journalist is what keeps consumers watching national, partisan news outlets. Consequently, regardless of whether it is a good or bad image portrayed, local outlets could potentially offer the possibility for an electorate to gain knowledge about who the candidate is and national outlets showcase the type of attitude candidates carry with them.

Additionally, gubernatorial candidates identify themselves and are perceived often as representative of everyday citizens of their states in local media outlets (Abramowitz, 2011). However, in national media outlets, the public assumes that these candidates are a representation of their political party—not a representation of their state (Abramowitz, 2011). Rhea and

Chattopadhyay (2014) explain that when political candidates are seeking to highlight their potential strength in their political party, they talk about issues. However, they are more likely to focus on non-issues when directed toward a more localized and targeted audience. This is consistent with the finding that gubernatorial candidates talked about issues more frequently in national outlets (92.2% of the time) compared to local outlets (64.1%). In constructing their image, it is possible that gubernatorial candidates take into account what their image might look like should they run for federal office in the future in front of a national audience. In doing so, to a degree, they are more apt to ignore their statewide audience in national outlets. As Abramowitz (2011) explains, local politicians can grab the national headlines if they are willing to be divisive and for a cautious moment, ignore the specified audience who intends to elect them in substitute for a wider, national audience. Consequently, it makes sense why a state's electorate is more likely to watch and gain knowledge about a candidate through local outlets: watching local outlets allows one to perceive that their gubernatorial candidates are more inclined to represent their state than their political party.

However, keeping that ideal with local outlets in check are the national news outlets taking a more aggressive style of engaging gubernatorial candidates. Considering that congressional and presidential members rarely enter local outlet interviews (Sheffield, 2010), only gubernatorial candidates function in this role of working between both national and local outlets. If anything, this necessary outlet blend keeps candidates in check: they have to talk about themselves and tell their electorate who they are, but then in national outlets they are encouraged to engage with a more aggressive and tough-minded attitude. Depending on how gubernatorial candidates handle that national outlet interview, it could showcase a candidate's flaws, such as a

candidate being unnecessarily aggressive, mean, or even ill tempered in front of a national audience.

Ultimately, the discursive purposes that arise out of both outlets provides a system of checks and balances to ensure the electorate is afforded a full image of seeing who gubernatorial candidates are and what type of attitude they carry with them. Such an important application can only be seen, however, when gubernatorial candidates go before both types of outlets. Otherwise, gubernatorial candidates risk not giving their voters a full image of who they might be. For some gubernatorial candidates, such a decision is likely intentional in an effort to showcase their quality attributes and to hide their attributes that may risk an otherwise positive image.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusion**

Gubernatorial candidates engage in a unique form of political discourse. While past gubernatorial candidates were known for accentuating the positive when appearing before the media and the electorate, candidates are now actively engaging in a more confrontational style of discourse by trespassing on party issues. Candidates are constructing an image of a statesman who is a savior to their state's concerns by focusing on state issues and complimenting their discourse with federal issues when the environment is appropriate to do so. Alternatively, gubernatorial candidates attempt to construct the image of a villain by attacking their opponent or the DC elite. Gubernatorial candidates are thus utilizing political interviews in an effort to showcase who they are and, when discussing their villain, who they are not.

This study further revealed that gubernatorial discourse is largely dependent on their electorate and the environment in which they are running. They deliberately decide between talking on state or federal issues. When candidates do talk about federal issues, it is often done so with consideration of what the current events are and whom they want to identify as their villain. Gubernatorial candidates are not pre-destined to talk purely about their own party-owned issues. Instead, they buck the trend found in presidential, congressional and senatorial candidates and are more fluid in moving back and forth between party-owned issues. Consequently, they allow their own electoral environment to guide what issues will help craft their image.

This research aimed to provide an understanding of what gubernatorial discourse looks like in a hyperpolarized context. Ultimately, gubernatorial candidates engage in a unique form of political discourse that knows little issue boundaries and a willingness to engage in a negative tone through federal issues when they believe it is appropriate.

## **Limitations**

With the context of these findings in mind, there are several limitations to this study. This study examined political interviews occurring in the general election of the 2014 midterm election. It is possible that 2014 is a unique and distinguishable year with regard to how gubernatorial candidates discursively constructed their image. Additionally, considering that 2014 was a midterm year without a presidential election, it is quite possible that candidates spoke differently than in years when presidential elections were also occurring and voter turnout was higher. In midterm years, voter turnout is consistently lower and it is often that only the base of each party who gets out to vote (Atler, 2014). Such discourse likely is not representative of how gubernatorial candidates might talk to independent or unaffiliated voters.

Second, there were significantly more local outlet interviews (78.5%) compared to national outlet interviews (21.5%). Considering that federal issues arose more frequently in national outlets (70.2%) compared to local outlets (19.8%), it is possible that the lack of equality between local and national outlets interviews in the sample influenced the frequency of scope of issues in this study's results. While this possibility exists, it is still likely that gubernatorial candidates appear more frequently in local interview outlets. Future research needs to investigate how frequently gubernatorial candidates appear in national outlet interviews compared to local outlet interviews. Until empirical data can suggest a representative proportion between the two outlets, the makeup of the sample could have confounded the scope of issue frequency.

Third, while Twitter was validated as a credible mechanism for obtaining texts for content analysis, it did not contain every single political interview that occurred during the 2014 general midterm election. The interviews also varied in time and setting. For instance, some interviews lasted as little as a minute and a half with local outlets, but others on national outlets

lasted for nearly fifteen minutes. It is possible that in a longer interview, candidates employ a different type of discourse. Even with these limitations, this study provides a descriptive understanding as to how gubernatorial discourse functions in a polarized environment.

### **Future Research**

Based on the content analysis of 1,524 utterances arising from journalists and gubernatorial candidates, this study revealed what gubernatorial discourse looks like in an electoral and polarized environment. However, this study was restricted to the general election. Future research should investigate what gubernatorial discourse looks like within the context of primary elections. While the findings of this study suggest that gubernatorial candidates are less likely to adhere to party-owned issues, it is possible that gubernatorial discourse might look differently when candidates are talking only to members of their respective political parties. Additionally, primary opponents often hold the same position on a multitude of issues (Abramowitz, 2011). It is likely that it would be more difficult to talk about one's opponent while using an attacking tone in primary elections compared to general elections. The possibility thus arises that in primary contests gubernatorial candidates are more likely to identify another agent as the primary villain in state-wide electoral contests. This expansion would contribute toward understanding how gubernatorial discourse shifts from appealing to an audience of voters strictly within one's party to a general election that requires candidates to appeal to voters of all parties. Such research, coupled with this study, could provide understanding in how gubernatorial candidates make that discursive move in transitioning from primary to general elections.

Beyond insight into primary elections, future research should investigate the role of journalists in influencing gubernatorial discourse in an interview format. The goal of this study

was to examine how gubernatorial candidates talk and construct their image in political interviews. However, findings suggest some unique tone and scope of issue trends with regard to journalists' discursive engagement. Baum & Groeling (2010) found that journalists play an influential role in how political candidates talk in interviews. Future studies should examine the differing roles that journalists play between those appearing on national outlets and those on local outlets. Ultimately, discourse arising from interviews is inherently based on a dialogue between two participants. While this study does offer valuable and descriptive insight into understanding gubernatorial discourse in political interview, an appropriate next step is to determine how journalists influence the gubernatorial discourse.

Next, while this study sought insight into understanding what gubernatorial discourse looks like, future research needs to investigate what unique discursive techniques are effective for gubernatorial candidates. For instance, based on the finding that gubernatorial candidates are more likely to use attack compared to years past, future investigation should offer insight into whether or not that tonal shift has been effective in helping gubernatorial candidates get elected. Additionally, future studies should examine if issue trespassing makes a difference in how the electorate perceives a candidate and whether it is successful in persuading voters. Petrocik (1996) claims that trespassing on issues is only as effective as the candidate's ability to showcase that they are experts on the issue. Essentially, further investigation should provide identifiable components for what makes trespassing effective in a gubernatorial context. Such an investigation provides insight into how effective it is for gubernatorial candidates to use a federal angle in discussing issues.

Additionally, a longitudinal study would offer insight into a shift in its discursive trends. While prior scholars have examined how presidential discourse has transformed over time

(Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005), further investigation on the shift of gubernatorial discourse could offer unique insight into how candidates implement federal and state issues in their discourse moving forward. Additionally, such study could provide an indication as to what gubernatorial discourse might look like in presidential election years compared to midterm elections.

Finally, while this study did not directly advance Hayes' (2005) trait ownership theory, future research needs to incorporate trait ownership in its investigation of gubernatorial discourse. This study focused on how issues construct a gubernatorial candidate's image, yet further inquiry is needed to understand how those character utterances found in the results influence a gubernatorial candidate's image construction. Providing a complementary study that uses the same set of data to determine how trait ownership functions with 2014 gubernatorial candidates would be an appropriate next step.

The purpose of this study was to identify how gubernatorial candidates discursively construct their image in a hyperpolarized context through political interviews. By investigating interview utterances in a general election setting, this study revealed that gubernatorial candidates choose their message with their audience in mind. Additionally, gubernatorial candidates do not adhere to the principles of issue ownership as found in other studies that investigated presidential, senatorial, or congressional candidates. Finally, the outlet in which the interview occurs, the state the candidate is in, and how competitive the race is are influential in determining what type of agent a candidate should speak about, the tone they use, and the scope of issue they choose to discuss. Although past research indicated that gubernatorial discourse focused on the positive, this study finds that gubernatorial candidates are not afraid to speak in a negative tone provided it offers a clear image construction of themselves as the savior and their



opponent or the DC elite as the villain. Gubernatorial discourse in a hyperpolarized electoral environment is a type of discourse that refuses to be defined by party boundaries in constructing a candidate's image. Instead, candidates are constructing their own image—a gubernatorial image.

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## Appendix A: Coding Scheme

### *Unit of Analysis: Interview*

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#### **1. Scene of the Interview**

- (1) *Blue State*: a state whose gubernatorial elections are commonly won by democrat candidates.
- (2) *Red State*: a state whose gubernatorial elections are commonly won by republican candidates.
- (3) *Purple State*: a state whose gubernatorial elections are evenly won by both democrat and republican candidates.

#### **2. Media outlet**

- (1) *National Outlet*
- (2) *Local Affiliate*

#### **3. Competitiveness of Race**

- (1) *Solid Republican*: a gubernatorial race in which it was expected the republican candidate would win by a margin of more than five percentage points.
- (2) *Solid Democrat*: a gubernatorial race in which it was expected the democratic candidate would win by a margin of more than five percentage points.
- (3) *Toss Up*: a gubernatorial race in which the margin of victory was expected to be less than five percentage points.

### *Unit of Analysis: Utterance*

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#### **1. Speaker**

- (1) *Interviewer* (Journalist)
- (2) *Interviewee* (Politician)

##### **1A. Political Affiliation**

If (2), then:

- (1) *Democrat*
- (2) *Republican*
- (3) *Independent*

##### **1B. Status of the candidate**

If (2), then:

- (1) *Incumbent*
- (2) *Challenger*

#### **2. Gender of the speaker**

- (1) *Male*
- (2) *Female*

### **3. Type of Utterance**

- (1) *Question*: any utterance that is expressed in a manner to elicit information from another participant.
- (2) *Answer*: any utterance that is an elicited response from an immediately preceding question in a line of utterances.
- (3) *Comment*: any utterance is an explicit claim that does not follow a question, but either an answer or another explicit comment.

#### **4A. Tone of Utterance by Candidates**

- (1) *Acclaims*: positive utterances about the qualities, accomplishment, or desirable proposals of a candidate.
- (2) *Attacks*: utterances that identify weaknesses or limitations of an opponent (or an opponent's political party).
- (3) *Defenses*: utterances that attempt to refute an attack made against a candidate (or a candidate's political party).
- (4) *Other*: utterances in which candidates do not make an explicit acclaim, attack or defense

#### **4B. Tone of Utterance by Journalists**

- (1) *Acclaim*: positive utterances by journalists about the qualities, accomplishment or desirable proposals of the interviewee or their opponent.
- (2) *Attacks*: utterances that remark or inquire about weaknesses or limitations of the interviewee or their opponent.
- (3) *Defenses*: utterances that attempt to refute an attack made against the interviewer.
- (4) *Other*: utterances in which journalists do not make an explicit acclaim, attack or defense.

### **5. Topic of Utterance**

- (1) *Issue*: any utterance that concerns governmental action (past, current or future) and problems amenable to government actions.
- (2) *Character*: any utterance that assesses a candidate's characteristics, traits, abilities or attributes of the candidate (or party's).
- (3) *Mixed*: any utterance that involves an assessment of government action, while also assessing a candidate's (or party's) characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes.
- (4) *Other*

#### **5A. Issue Topic**

- (1) *Moral Values*
- (2) *Spending/Deficit*
- (3) *Taxes*
- (4) *Crime*
- (5) *Education*
- (6) *Health Care*
- (7) *Jobs*
- (8) *Environment*
- (9) *Immigration*
- (10) *Other*

### **5B. Issue Ownership**

- (1) *Republican Owned Issue*: any issue utterance, which offers a focus on moral values, spending/deficit, taxes or crime.
- (2) *Democrat Owned Issue*: any issue utterance, which offers a focus on education, health care, jobs or the environment.
- (3) *Performance Issue*: Any utterance about an issue that is considered up for grabs to take ownership over during an election cycle.

### **6. Scope of Issue**

- (1) *Federal*: any utterance that assesses the merit or claims an action that is directly related to an agency, person or body of the federal government.
- (2) *State*: any utterance that assesses the merit or claims an action that is directly related to an agency, person or body of a state government.

### **7. Agent(s) Involved**

- (1) *Candidate*: utterances that reflect or inquire about the candidate's own personal ideology, belief or thought process.
- (2) *Opponent*: utterances that reflect or inquire about a candidate's opponent's character, issue position or ideology.
- (3) *DC Elite*: utterances that reflect, inquire, or attempt to draw a relationship that involves federal politicians.
- (4) *Constituents*: utterances that reflect or inquire about the constituents that a candidate seeks to serve.
- (5) *Journalists*: utterances that include a reference to the media and journalists
- (6) *Mixed*: utterances that involve a mixture of any of the four above-mentioned categories.



### Appendix B: Inter Coder Reliability

Variable	Cohen's <i>Kappa</i>
Type of Utterance	.92
Tone of Utterance by Candidates	.83
Tone of Utterance by Journalists	.72
Topic of Utterance	.91
Issue Topic	.90
Issue Ownership	.96
Scope of Issue	.86
Agent(s) Involved	.81